

Diyanath Samarasinghe

ALCOHOL AND POVERTY: *some connections*



Our vision

*FORUT's vision is a world in peace and without poverty,
where all are secured human rights and social justice,
and where alcohol and drugs do not prevent people's
well being and fulfilment of human potential.*

Alcohol and Poverty: some connections
by Diyanath Samarasinghe

Published by FORUT – Campaign for Development and Solidarity

This publication is a part of FORUT's ADD programme;
Alcohol, Drugs and Development.

Cover photo: India – Ingvar Midthun

This file is a printer friendly version of the FORUT publication
"Alcohol and Poverty: some connections".
Copies of the printed version can be ordered from FORUT.

ADD contact: add@forut.no

Web site: www.add-resources.org

Production/design: Idéhuset Sandbeck, Gjøvik, 2009

ISBN 978-82-991435-6-1



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Foreword

Poverty eradication is at the top of the development agenda. Millennium Development Goal No 1 reads: *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*. The World Bank has estimated that around 20 per cent of the world's population lives on one dollar a day or less.

Many well established poverty reduction strategies address the important root causes of poverty. Surprisingly few strategies, however, address one common denominator in the lives of many poor families: problems related to harmful use of alcohol and other drugs.

Plenty of anecdotal evidence shows how substance abuse, often alcohol and most often consumed by men, can severely affect poor households. Such families are vulnerable even to small changes destabilizing their daily hand-to-mouth economy, and alcohol use has proven to be one of these destabilizing factors in many countries.

The Voices of the Poor study, published by WHO and the World Bank in 2002, points out that poor people see alcohol and other drug use as a major consequence of poverty, but it also illustrates that alcohol use can be a cause of poverty.

In a study of substance use and gender-based violence in Malawi a 27 year old woman from Lilongwe reported that if her husband had not been drinking, they would always have enough food. This situation was described by a number of the female informants in the study, and also by the men themselves: *I used up all the money I received as salary in December 2005 on beers. Whenever I try to recall on what happened I feel sorry for myself because the following month I starved very much because I had nothing to feed the family.* (27 year old man from Chembe)

By this publication FORUT hopes to contribute towards a better understanding of how poverty and alcohol use are interlinked. Professor Diyanath Samarasinghe of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, challenges us that poverty reduction cannot merely focus on how to increase income levels in poor families. It is also essential to consider how poor families spend their disposable income, however small it may be. Rather than a culture of saving, alcohol is a part of a culture of spending which drains poor families' resources, contributing to downward spirals. Even small money can contribute to the development of families and communities, when used for purposes that can start and fuel upward spirals.

Is the 'development community', in the South and in the West, prepared to take up Professor Samarasinghe's challenge? Not to replace existing poverty reduction strategies, but to make them more complete and effective.



Morten Lønstad
FORUT Secretary General

Ethiopia – Photo: Wim van Dalen



Introduction

From the complex of connections between alcohol and poverty, this paper tries to extract those with potential to generate novel and useful applications. Alcohol has diverse influences on people's economic status while economic status in turn affects alcohol use in many ways.

The impact of alcohol on poverty is more than through just the money spent on it. And the converse influence, of poverty on alcohol, has far more to it than found in the inane explanation that heavy consumption is the result of the harshness of poor lives. Less recognised aspects of the interactions between alcohol and poverty will be examined in some detail here.

We need also to look at some common factors that have impact on both alcohol use and poverty (for example, prevailing political philosophy) and things synergistically influenced by alcohol and poverty (for example, health problems). The latter includes also education, quality of life, impaired wellbeing of families and society. This synergistic effect has implications for agencies interested in reducing poverty or promoting 'development'.

Issues to address therefore include the following:

- Influence of poverty on alcohol use and problems
- Influence of alcohol use on poverty and poverty alleviation
- Impact of alcohol use and poverty on health, education and quality of life.
- What can be done to reduce harm and increase wellbeing in relation to each of these

The literature on each of the points listed is vast, and much of it is tentative. This paper is not a formal review of existing literature but an attempt to select things that have most promise in improving how we understand things and how we could respond sensibly. Given the intention to provide more of a synthesis than a collation based on

evidence, I have avoided formally referencing the document as a whole, and provided instead a list of the most important sources at the end. But I draw attention to some of these in the text. I try as well not to reiterate the known evidence-based alcohol policy strategies already in use for the public good (comprehensively reviewed in Babor et al., 2003). This is not to underestimate their value but to focus on the limited scope and thrust of this paper.

Clear understanding is essential for progress. We need to see plainly the bases on which our current actions are founded. It becomes possible then to examine our assumptions critically and to put them to empirical test. An examination of strategy documents (e.g., Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers developed by many countries with the IMF) will demonstrate the huge differences in logical coherence of different country plans and the relative neglect of crucial day to day realities for the poor individual or family.

Alcohol too figures among the realities of life that impact heavily of poverty. Considerations in this paper about alcohol should remind us of many other overpowering daily issues connected to poverty that are not noticed by distant planners and decision makers.

What is presented here in relation to alcohol is often true for many other similar 'socially used' substances. In this paper I avoid repeatedly saying 'alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs', even when a statement applies to the wider set of substances, and choose instead to refer mostly to alcohol – with just occasional reminders of these other substances.

I will first, as background, set out a few attributes of poverty, poverty alleviation efforts and alcohol use that are relevant to the arguments developed here. I will then take up the four issues listed earlier in this introduction.

Sierra Leone – Photo: Øystein Bakke



Background issues

Poverty

The case does not need to be made for why we should reduce poverty. Nor did it need to be at any time in the history of our species. Present attention to poverty, and efforts to minimize it, is a reflection of the advancement of human civilization and humanity (ref: MDG and monitoring reports, for example). But what exactly we mean by poverty still needs to be clarified.

We should be interested in more than just poverty of income or resources. (The World Bank and ADD websites listed under 'Suggested reading' at the end provide useful entries for an overview of poverty issues.) Poverty and low income are not one and the same. Lower income is associated with less education and a limitation in richness of people's lives. Lives are limited in the range of things to be involved in or to do, in variety of interests, in aspirations to aim for and in comforts and range of opportunities to enjoy life and leisure.

Poverty leads to lack of control and uncertainty. It also makes lives monotonous – with little variation over years or generations. Despite lives being tediously predictable the poor are uneasily uncertain about the future – being selectively vulnerable to natural and unnatural stresses. Any variation from a routine and unchanging life comes in the form of a calamity. The ironic net result is uncertainty coupled with monotony.

Vulnerability is noticed by those who study poverty – who recognize it in the form of increased proneness to many negative health and social outcomes. An expression of vulnerability is in difficulty to cope with external events or stresses – that people with adequate resources can easily overcome. But the impact of this is not only in failing to overcome natural and man-made troubles – it expresses itself also as a subjective feeling of insecurity and uncertainty and lack of control. Lack of control is considered a major contributor to ill-being in what are called health promotional approaches, as well.

Among the economically deprived there is a great deal of intra-group difference. The poor are of many levels and very different one from the other, just as are the rich. But being classed together, and indeed crowded together, makes poorer people to be seen and dealt with less as individuals and more as a mass. Bearing this tendency to over-generalize firmly in mind, I still want tentatively to present a few selected overarching characteristics as important common features of poverty. Many associations of poverty are well recognized and need no further explication here, but some are less noticed.

Resilience and solidarity

Poverty may have hidden compensations. When we suffer deprivation we'd be induced to respond to, rather than turn away from, the suffering of others. Our neighbour's needs and difficulties are often engrossingly visible crises just as ours are, when we are crowded together. Resilience and fellow feeling are more likely to result in such a milieu. Solidarity, comradeship and generosity can be features of real life in a deprived and overcrowded community just as it can be part of the false picture in the outsider's romanticized imagination of what life is like for the disadvantaged.

Lack of boundaries

The poorer we are, the less we can 'wall ourselves off' as a family or even as individuals within a family. The boundaries of the poor are porous; others can intrude uninvited. Because of the porosity of the living space, the poor find it difficult to improve economically, or in other ways, especially if those around them do not particularly wish to see them develop. Examples of how these influences operate were encountered in a study on alcohol and poverty in Sri Lanka (Baklien and Samarasinghe, 2005). We suggested there that poverty alleviation efforts will be made more effective or efficient the more it becomes a shared or social initiative, given this porosity of poor people's living space.

Porosity has other important consequences. The lack of private space makes it difficult to resolve conflicts in private. 'Loss of face' has to be avoided and, strangely, there is probably more fighting and aggression among themselves when people cannot have a boundary between themselves and the rest of the world. Or the fighting is more visible. Either of these mechanisms could explain the common and superficial assumption that poverty leads to violence.

The related impression, that the poor are more prone to criminality, may be the result of how law enforcement operates. It may partly be due to the more frequent and open trade in illicit alcohol and other drugs in poor communities. A more genuine reason for a connection, if any, between poverty and criminality may be that organized criminal groups find it easier or cheaper to recruit members from poorer settings.

Envy and jealousy

A feeling of 'envy' for anybody who rises above the rest is more likely where living conditions are transparent. This may lead to a tendency where people collectively keep all families at the same level. Envy and jealousy go together, and can lead to active efforts to prevent one family or sub-group forging ahead of the larger community. And this tendency can be heavily reinforced where there is a struggle for survival coupled with porosity of the living space.

Visible consumption

There is a tendency to refer to unaffordable expenses incurred by poor individuals and families in a slightly condescending voice. But this is to ignore the way the world is for the poor person. Much of the poor family's binge spending is in celebrations. And the special family event that is celebrated is often the one opportunity in a lifetime, for some to demonstrate their capability or even to be noticed.

People spend money on goods that give them, among other things, social credit. Visible expenditure allows the poor too to validate themselves, to demonstrate – for example, that they are not penniless. Disastrous spending may be driven by the need for social esteem which is, unfortunately, the biggest determinant of self esteem. Show off is at least occasionally necessary.

The impact of costs of celebrations is now receiving attention. It was documented in the Sri Lankan study referred to earlier (Baklien and Samarasinghe 2003) and is reported from studies in India as well (see Abhijit V. – The economic lives of the poor). The contribution of alcohol to these expenses is well known and also recorded in studies. In Thailand there have even been attempts to see how inordinate celebratory expenses may be curtailed, as part of efforts aimed at development. Curtailing episodic extravagant expenditure should be coupled with the opening of better avenues for social validation.

Identification and aspirations

Identification with norms of 'the poor' has consequences for overcoming poverty. Belonging to the middle class or identifying with its norms influences what a 'middle class' person achieves. Poor people do not find middle class aspirations natural. Nor are these aspirations sensible – if they lead only to increased disappointment and frustration when they cannot be realised. Overcoming poverty means a change in aspirations too. And this isn't easy, for the relevant aspirations are not only hard to achieve but also alien to the poor person's culture.

'Impossibility' of overcoming poverty

The popular rags to riches story sets up the model of the determined individual from a deprived family who overcomes all obstacles, through effort and application, reaches the highest rungs of wealth. The flip side is that those who remain poor are somehow lacking in determination or capability. Setting out the one-in-a-million chain of events as the ideal route or model to follow turns the sensible person off. Only fools, or the foolhardy, would embark on enterprises which are overwhelmingly likely to make them fall flat on their face. People are more likely to engage with scripts that are not too much like fairy tales.

Accounts of gradual and modest improvement are far more realistic and more common, but are never presented. It is not as if there are not examples of gradual emergence from poverty. But such stories and the modest changes that they imply aren't eye-catching enough. So the stories don't attract attention and fail to serve as examples that are true to life. Not only should we have models that are realistic, we should also have efforts to bring to popular attention the successes that have resulted, even though they may be rather un-dramatic.

Sadly though, examples of this kind too are not common enough. A frequent observation we heard from the desperately crowded poor was that people cannot progressively emerge from abject poverty as long as they continue to live in their present overcrowded setting, irrespective of the income they earn (Baklien and Samarasinghe, 2005). One factor underlying this is the 'porosity' of living arrangements that was referred to earlier. Another may be that people have not only to overcome their own personal and private poverty. They have to overcome the culture of poverty that enfolds them, a culture that not only influences aspirations but also actively obstructs those who may be bold enough to try to improve their circumstances.

Poverty alleviation

Lack of opportunities, facilities and services contribute to maintaining poverty. These aspects are well recognised and strong attempts have been made to address them – such as in efforts to reach global Millennium Development Goals and in most national poverty reduction strategy papers ('PRSP's). These actions include substantial initiatives to reduce the worst aspects of deprivation among poor populations – but far less vigorous efforts to address structural global and national factors that underlie these. At the other end of the spectrum from grand global and national initiatives is the effort of one individual to reach out to help her less fortunate neighbour.

Governmental responses include attempts to protect the poorest by providing a 'safety net' – including handouts to those with minimal or no income. The results of pure handouts, which are quite expensive to deliver long term, aren't promising. But efforts to make handouts conditional on the family satisfying given criteria, such as schooling for children, as tried out in some countries of South America, have performed better.

Improving income is the other major element of present poverty reduction efforts. These are mostly entrepreneurial and focussed on individuals or small collectives. Success is reported from small-scale, labour-intensive or appropriate technology activities, as in the now well known experiences from Bangladesh. Greater success from such initiatives, and from conditional handouts, has resulted when women have been in the driving seat.

The tendency for many promising enterprises to collapse when too many others in the vicinity see their success and copy them, leading to capacity exceeding what the locally accessible market can support, should also be noted. This is easy to prevent with just a little foresight.

Necessary improvements

Because Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are derived from structural analyses and logical frameworks that flow from 'big picture' considerations, there is not enough room to fit in such matters as collective aspirations, the influence of alcohol and other substance use, active impediments placed by poor families on each other's development, the devastating impact of a single unforeseen but predictable crisis or bad experience, the need for and impact of inordinate celebratory expenses and the like (see 'The Economic Lives of the Poor' – Abhijit et al). This omission is dreadful, for there are many useful interventions that can put in at an 'intermediate level' between the broad policy approach and the individual or small group based savings and micro-enterprise approaches.

The other major weakness of national strategy papers is that they try only to harness the potential of governments, private sector and civil society agencies but ignore initiatives to see how to minimize the contribution of these very agencies to generating or worsening poverty. The politically correct engagement of big business in poverty alleviation is especially important here for their involvement may impede action to curtail their damaging impacts (see for example Jahiel and Babor, 2007). Potential negative impact that may be caused by involvement of the state or civil society is less well documented.

Far greater attention is needed, in strategic plans, to understanding and addressing local determinants of poverty and deprivation. These include factors listed in the previous section, as realities associated with poverty. Most of these are about the ways people use their resources. The ways in which the poor – and indeed the rich – are trained to spend their earnings are appallingly under-explored. Some expenses are recognised as undesirable but imagined to be inflexible. Alcohol expenditure figures prominently here, as do expenses for special events and show-off. Understanding and dealing with factors that influence patterns of expenditure is vital. In many poor communities, alcohol and other substance use expenditure offers the greatest scope for change.

The broader weakness in poverty reduction plans is the lack of a comprehensive model of intervention, or even of understanding – especially from the standpoint of the poor family and community. A critical examination of even a few randomly selected national poverty reduction strategy papers (see, IMF) would reveal this fact. Patterns of expenditure being set in detrimental ways, conditioned limitation of aspirations, the influence of lack of boundaries, envy, jealousy and other inclinations nearby, the imperative for visible consumption, the potentially harmful influence of the wider community on progress by individual families and the collapse of promising small enterprises when the spawning of copycat local efforts make them unviable are all examples of crucial contributors not adequately addressed at present. Alcohol plays a part in many of these. It permits the least developed members of a group to restrain others from progressing or developing – or leaving them behind. Alcohol allows uninvited intrusion. This role of alcohol must be understood in encouraging community development.

Development is about more than just physical resources, and primarily about wellbeing. This in turn depends mostly on how we relate to each other. A model that integrates the major contributors to wellbeing can help all humans to develop, and not just the economically deprived. But examining ways to improve the wellbeing of the wealthy is beyond the scope of this paper.

Alcohol use

Many aspects of alcohol use and factors that contribute to its use and problems are well-recognized. A few relatively neglected matters that are relevant to the arguments in this paper are selected for brief mention here.

Image of alcohol and alcohol use

A positive, attractive and symbolically desirable image of alcohol increases its use. These attractions cut across social class. But for the poor there is the additional value of alcohol as a ready and easily available symbol that they too are able to match what rich people do. Even the occasional consumption of a relatively more expensive beverage can for instance serve to demonstrate the fact.

The subjective effect of alcohol

The way we evaluate the subjective experience of alcohol differs according to setting. Social influences have enormous bearing on the way that the alcohol experience is described and rated. Some people who don't find the experience of alcohol at all pleasant are still inclined to report falsely that they like it, primarily because they consume it voluntarily. Others who like the taste of particular alcoholic beverages but not really its later effects on the brain don't distinguish the two. That alcohol is universally experienced as pleasurable is, as a result, the dominant view among both rich and poor. It would be hard to express a different opinion even if there were differing alcohol experiences.

The cost and status of the beverage has strong bearing on the pleasure said to be produced by the molecule ethyl alcohol, but this fact is generally ignored. Poor people tend to consume illicit alcohol more frequently than the rich. Far less pleasure is ascribed to ethyl alcohol when it is drunk in the shape of illicit brews as compared to the licit brews, especially the most expensive ones.

Behaviour and alcohol use

People living in deprived and crowded settings are less able to prevent others transgressing personal boundaries, for reasons described previously. People in other kinds of settings too find that others are allowed to impose their will on them when intoxicated. The combined effect of these two influences is quite vicious. People in poor communities, especially the less powerful members, are doubly vulnerable to allegedly 'alcohol induced' misbehaviour.

In addition to the vulnerability due to lack of strong boundaries, aggression after consuming alcohol appears also to be more 'permitted' in poorer communities – but this impression needs more specific evidence to validate. If this is indeed the case a greater prevalence of domestic violence and gender based violence in such settings can be expected and explained.

Alcohol and public norms

That culture and norms surrounding drunken behaviour influence the conduct of intoxicated persons is well recognised. But the opposite influence isn't. In the poverty study in Sri Lanka that was referred to previously, it was found that drunken behaviour eventually influences the way that people behave even when they are not 'drunk'.

Social norms and rules of decent conduct are allowed to be broken in drinking settings, but to different degrees in different cultures. This authorization to break rules when drunk can spill over to the rest of social life. Behaviour that is not considered decent in ordinary society becomes gradually less objectionable when it is displayed repeatedly, even if it is only when people are drunk. 'Unacceptable' behaviour that is allowed in drinking settings then becomes more acceptable with time, even in non-drinking settings. Infiltration of lowered norms of decency from alcohol settings to non-drinking settings is more likely in crowded living conditions associated with poverty.

Influence of poverty on alcohol use and problems

The superficial link commonly drawn is that poor people take refuge in alcohol to alleviate the unendurable suffering of their lives. In some circles drinking is explained as the natural and expected response to misery. Alcohol is popularly assumed to be a way of temporarily escaping for a short while the harsh realities associated with poverty. A closer look will probably demonstrate that the poor who drink, just like the rich, aren't really afforded any such respite. Quite apart from whether alcohol itself alleviates suffering, the simple formulation that the poor drink because it helps them alleviate their suffering hides more important and complex connections. A few examples follow.

Social value of alcohol spending

Alcohol serves to integrate people. Drinking together demonstrates solidarity. We are allowed the illusion of being equals in the drinking setting. The less well-off are buddies with the wealthy, drinking with them. But the illusion is not habitually available. Rarely do the rich even drink with the poor.

The less affluent may feel more at ease with the rich in the bar. But the opportunity of consorting with the rich still requires membership in their drinking groups. The attraction of such membership can lead to unbearable expenses – but this does not apply to the really badly-off. Collateral damage from consorting with the well-heeled is inflicted only on those at the fringes of wealth.

A commoner manifestation of disastrous alcohol expenditure for its symbolic value is in celebrations and special events among the less affluent, as was referred to previously. Poor people get into lifelong debt, simply as the result of intolerable expenditure on a wedding or other special occasion. Celebrations allow a distancing from the poverty of everyday life, and the allure of ven a once in a lifetime expression of it can lead to a lifetime of ruinous consequences.

Effect of increasing affluence

What happens to patterns of consumer spending as a poor country or population becomes more affluent has not been widely studied. The effect on alcohol consumption is complicated. For one thing, alcohol ceases to be the primary expression of ability to spend. Spending diversifies and alcohol becomes one of a wider range of commodities that are included in the repertoire. At the same time, conspicuous consumption is still an expression of affluence. Increased alcohol consumption, both in everyday life and on special occasions, can easily be made conspicuous. Being modern and developed includes drinking and showing it off, although it may no longer be the only or most important way. Alcohol and other drugs serve as ready symbols of graduation to a modern identity. The divergent impact of these social imperatives is further complicated because they probably apply differently to different groups – especially based on religion, age and previous levels of consumption.

Drinking or serving much alcohol or more expensive beverages serves to demonstrate wealth. And the poor too may serve much alcohol to show that they can afford it. Poor people drink and serve alcohol for much the same reasons as the rich – including the need to demonstrate ability to spend.

Alcohol as readymade channel of expenditure

Abjectly poor people learn not to plan. Money must be found to live the day. To strive for more is often to fall flat on your face. The result is that money earned is quickly spent. Money saved gets spent on others.

Expenditure on alcohol and other such substances is frequently the largest or the only 'non-essential' expense for the very poor (ignoring dependence for the moment). This reinforces the perception of alcohol as a 'luxury'. But there are other significant consequences too. Narrowing of the repertoire of 'non-essential' spending to just alcohol or other substance use leads to it siphoning away any extra income that may come to hand. Not being used to saving or spending on anything else makes alcohol the 'natural' way, for instance, to spend money that comes at harvest time. Any other profit, windfall or unexpected income too simply flows along this readymade channel, primarily because there is nothing else that is familiar or even recognised.

The reason for increased expenditure on alcohol as wealth increases may not be what seems superficially obvious – that poor people naturally find alcohol an attractive consumer option when they get more money. Other reasons exist too – such as the fact that alcohol marketers are more active in the more affluent world to which the poor graduate. It is likely that marketers of goods such as alcohol try to influence the determinants of use. Thus a culture which is traditionally against alcohol use, for religious reasons for example, may find the religious value too undermined by commercial interests. Cultural and religious values and norms are said to change when people become more affluent and 'westernised'. Part of this may be because of unseen commercial influences that deliberately try to create changes in such values, in a direction more in favour of consuming their particular product.

Influence of alcohol use on poverty and poverty alleviation

Meaningful connections as well as statistical associations support the conclusion that alcohol contributes to generating and worsening poverty in many societies. Of the many aspects of development on which alcohol has an impact, let's consider the issues of how heavy a cost alcohol constitutes for the poor and the effect of alcohol on poverty alleviation.

Recognised alcohol spending

Everybody recognizes that calculating the cost of reported alcohol consumption is too narrow a measure of the impact of alcohol on development. Most would see that it is too narrow even as a measure of the economic impact of alcohol. And the fact that people are likely to underreport their alcohol expenditures is also widely recognised. But the reported costs of alcohol are still worth calculating. Even just the reported expenditures are worryingly high.

In various studies and censuses the money spent on alcohol and other things that people buy are surveyed and calculated. There are many formal and informal studies from poorer countries assessing the 'economic impact' of alcohol in terms of how much money people say they spend on alcohol – elicited by asking, for instance, the expenditure on alcohol in the past week or on a typical day and so on. Despite the recognised likely underestimation, these costs for the poor are found to be a huge burden when seen as a proportion of people's income (see Abhijit V et al – The Economic Lives of the Poor, ADD website, ADIC Sri Lanka, and WHO Global Status Reports).

The percentage of income spent on alcohol is found to be vastly larger than what we'd guess. The combined cost of alcohol, tobacco and other such substances is, in abjectly poor communities, appallingly large. The damaging impact on the most deprived families, of desperately needed resources being thus taken away from the little available for food and other basics, should be constantly emphasised – until its horrific scale is more widely recognised.

Unrecognised alcohol spending

Calculations of expenditure on alcohol is heavily underestimated, and results from several mechanisms. One of these is simply the deliberate or unwitting underestimation of costs in self-reports. We can at least make a correction for such underestimates, for we suspect that this tendency operates. But there are other mechanisms too, which lead to some significant alcohol costs being unnoticed.

One unnoticed channel of alcohol expenditure is the subsidization of others' alcohol expenses. When one party wittingly or unwittingly pays for another's drinks, the cost is not reported by the party that consumes or by the party that provides the money. This is not a reference to the ritual of different members of the drinking group buying of rounds of drinks but to a more 'one-way' channel, with heavier consumers being regularly subsidized by others. In some non-western cultures the tendency for some drinkers to 'persuade' others to pay for their consumption is quite strong. (These are described in detail in Baklien and Samarasinghe, 2003 – 'Alcohol and Poverty')

Small events are frequent and expenses are regularly pooled among heavy users and others and neither party notices or reports the real cost. Even non-celebratory or non-event based alcohol use (namely regular or day-to-day use) is subsidized in many ways. Much of 'irregular income' such as through lotteries, bribes, fraud and cheating, gets readily channelled into the alcohol pool. 'Loans' taken and not repaid, forcible donations gathered from various sources and collections for alleged communal activities and good deeds are other channels through which regular drinking gets subsidized by people who are not in the regular heavy drinking group. A large contributor to the daily alcohol purchases of heavy drinkers are their wives, who regularly contribute part of their earnings for the husband's alcohol, so as to keep the peace within the home.

Another kind of unseen payment is through contributions for special occasions or major celebrations. Events can range from annual family occasions to once in a lifetime celebrations. Money is taken on loan to keep up to expected standards, and failure to recoup from guests' gifts may lead to a lifetime of crippling interest payments to local 'loan sharks'. Property, jewellery and other possessions can be lost to the family as a result. These kinds of expenses are never reported in alcohol consumption surveys for they are not daily happenings. But their eventual impact is on day to day life.

Sierra Leone – Photo: Øystein Bakke



Hindering poverty alleviation

Alcohol's role in allowing people to intrude into others' lives was described previously (under the heading 'alcohol'). The lack of boundaries for poor people or porosity of the living space and the tendency for this to generate more obvious envy or jealousy was also described previously – under the heading 'poverty'.

Many poverty alleviation efforts try to get poor people to improve their economic status by increasing their incomes. The effect of these is usually unevenly spread among members of the poor community. This leads to improvement being visible. When there is visible improvement of a family, or a few families, among others who remain as they were, the response of the others is not always wholehearted joy. A desire to stop them moving ahead of the common lot may result as well.

In communities dominated by elements hostile to the progress of others, alcohol affords a ready means to intrude. A family or small group of families will find it quite hard to improve unless the most influential members of the community are included. The more powerful or influential members find it easiest to insist that others conform using the license given to the intoxicated person. The heavier alcohol consumers are often the most difficult members of the community to help develop. But if they are likely to be 'left behind' they have ways to make sure that others don't progress either. Alcohol itself constitutes a good means of siphoning money off those who are becoming better off.

Expenditure is enforced through several means. Heavier consumers can ensure, for example, the rule that every happy occasion must be an alcohol occasion. Partying and enjoyment being necessarily alcohol-centred is a lesson that people learn from the media, thanks to deliberate alcohol promotions as well as unintended ones. The feeling that much alcohol must be served for a 'proper' party is often strongly established. And the visibly improving families can be pushed to have celebrations for fear of becoming the target of negative reactions, especially from those who are loud when drunk. This is only one example of the numerous ways that exist to keep everybody at the same level as those who are slowest to progress.

A particularly damaging social practice is that of allowing the consumption of alcohol on credit. When alcohol is bought on credit it does not feel particularly a heavy economic burden. Free alcohol is highly affordable – for the usual economic constraint on consumption is less felt. The future is mortgaged for today's all-too-easy expense. The impact is particularly virulent in settings where income is episodic, as at harvest time. By the time of the harvest alcohol loans may exceed the total income that is realised.

Impact of poverty and alcohol use on health and wellbeing

This section is included as a brief reminder that alcohol use and poverty, when they occur together, each intensifies the damage done by the other.

The negative effects of heavy alcohol use and poverty multiply each other when they occur together. A family whose wellbeing is compromised by serious poverty but no heavy alcohol user in it is wholly better off than a family of equivalent economic status but also with a member who is a frequent heavy drinker. Some of the mechanisms by which the negative effects associated with alcohol use enhance the loss of wellbeing connected to poverty are obvious. More subtle influences should be noticed too.

An example of the obvious connections is the effect on health. A poor person who drinks heavily is much more likely to suffer damaging health consequences from alcohol than a wealthy person drinking equivalent amounts. The greater impact includes, for example, the effect on nutrition of the individual and family, transmission of tuberculosis

and even the incidence of liver disease. And in the other direction, a few days' illness or lay-off due to an alcohol related problem has redoubled impact on a family that is already desperately poor. Just the interference with daily income is enough to explain this. Combined damage from alcohol and poverty on nearly all aspects of life can similarly be understood and are not detailed here.

More subtle effects include the effect of alcohol on such things as how we relate to each other. Under poor and porous living conditions, the tendency for the weak to be the target of drunken misbehaviour is community-wide. The vulnerability of some men, and most women and children is as a result increased. Much of the subtle harm comes from intoxicated people being allowed to behave in nasty ways, which has far greater damage in overcrowded and open living conditions.

The synergistic effect of alcohol and poverty, or the mutual enhancement of each other's negative effects, crushes those who are doubly affected.

What can be done to reduce harm?

Much that is good is already being done, but the good is very unevenly spread. Richer countries seem to benefit most from the evidence based approaches that have been developed so far (see Babor et al, Room et al and WHO 2004). Most of the useful responses take the form of national policies enacted by governments. The effective actions are broadly those that reduce overall alcohol consumption in a society and restrict its supply and promotion, as well as some targeted actions such as server liability measures and actions to prevent drinking and driving. Local or community action constitutes only a small part of current interventions to address poverty or the combined effects of alcohol and poverty. Greater promise of beneficial impact in poorer countries may lie with local action.

Policy and strategic planning options

Make strategic plans comprehensive and clear

Poverty reduction plans should now set out more clearly their theoretical underpinnings and assumptions. We need a comprehensive model or models for understanding poverty and development initiatives. We can then better test the relative importance of different components.

Income generation, handouts, improved access to services and safety nets must fit into a broader frame that sets out other, less emphasised, elements. A framework or guidelines to help people decide elements or components of a desirable pattern of expenditure according to income, factors that undermine people's ability to control their own expenditure (including that on substances such as alcohol), enhancing the positives and minimising negatives from mass media influences, encouraging peace and mutual cooperation versus aggression and hostility are all parts of this jigsaw.

The gap between international or national policy actions and individual or small group interventions has to be addressed. Options for societal or community level action, in addition to and complementing government and international policy action, must be included as a major added element. Alcohol issues are probably even better addressed in poor countries at this level than through government action. Several measures in this regard were described in this paper.

Different components can eventually be set out in a logical hierarchy. They can also be emphasised or downgraded according to existent conditions. The net result should be a broad scheme from which we can all derive our own simple map, to help us see better where we are hoping to reach and how we propose to do so. We need a map for our various projects and programmes, for our communities and for our own individual lives, especially if our income is small.

Focus beyond income generation

In this exercise we should pay greater attention to the way in which we are all trained to spend our money. We don't really perceive how we are moulded by deliberate and unwitting influences to continue our set patterns of expenditure. If we saw these better we'd be able to take more control over our consumer behaviour, whether we are classed as poor, rich or in-between. Influencing established patterns of consumer spending offers much promise in improving wellbeing.

Lack of insight into how habits, values and behaviour are influenced by deliberate manipulation by others, especially pervasive commercial influences, makes change difficult. Alcohol provides a good 'entry point' for communities to start a process of discovery and positive change or development. Recognising other agents that manipulate public perceptions and beliefs can similarly lead to understanding about how the alcohol trade operates. Both routes should lead eventually to people taking more control over their established patterns of expenditure.

On the alcohol front, there are known national policy options to selectively reduce consumption. Increasing taxation and limitation of supply or availability are included here. But their application in poorer countries is seen as less beneficial than in the rich. The common counter arguments are that alcohol taxation imposes selectively greater burdens on the poor and that the presence of a substantial trade in illicit alcohol in many poorer communities renders these measures counter productive because they only apply to the licit alcohol market. These counter arguments are only partially valid and aren't a reason for wholesale rejection of policies that have worked in different settings.

Include attention to control over expenditure

We need interventions to help modify people's spending habits. Patterns of expenditure are set by local and remote forces that can be altered through successful collective action. Communities find it quite feasible to gain increasing control over their communal alcohol and other substance use expenditures, when they are guided to address the determinants of use. This should serve as example for how other expenses can be dealt with too.

Several scattered examples demonstrate that communal processes can lead to greater control by poor people over their alcohol expenditure. Alcohol is therefore a good starting point for learning to take shared control over other kinds of expenditure too. Programmed patterns of consumer spending are not inflexible.

Avoid tagging 'the poor' as some homogenous mass

Policy makers sitting far away run the risk of seeing 'the poor' as a uniform and amorphous mass out there somewhere. As a result, the measures they devise are undermined by various forces that operate within communities.

There is, for instance, hardly any attention in development plans to the organised as well as informal vested interests both within and beyond poor communities, which want them to remain poor – and vulnerable. These include outfits that need a ready pool of people to exploit for low paid jobs, criminal or political activities and sexual and other services. They may not be keen on initiatives that allow poor communities greater control over their lives. Other interests, such as the licit and illicit alcohol trade, are simply interested in the money that can be siphoned off the poor. Their contribution to poverty generation is only an unintended outcome.

Recognize importance of local responses

Local action has to be based on accurate understanding of existing realities. Since strategic plans are made in far away places, all possibilities for local action get rather little attention, as of only limited relevance and impossible to work into broad plans. Fostering appropriate local action and providing a place in strategic plans for these, is quite feasible.

There is scope for substantial change through local efforts, which must be encouraged and explored actively. But their potential for wide application is limited if the theoretical premises are not clearly apparent. Attention must now focus on fostering local responses and learning from their successes and failures, to improve their technical component. Some local interventions are sufficiently robust to apply to a wide variety of settings and countries.

Alcohol is a useful example in the development of local action initiatives. Local action approaches with promise for widespread application are described elsewhere (see Samarasinghe 2005, 'Strategies to address alcohol problems'). The models tested on alcohol have proven successful and can be transplanted across settings because they have an alcohol-specific technical content. Success stems from a shared or community wide insight and shift of perceptions leading to changes in habitual behaviours.

Lessons from this model will allow the development of interventions to address other determinants of poverty, which were referred to previously. An example is a collective social move in society or a community to reduce inordinate celebratory expenses. The same strategy can be applied to other issues that were discussed. But each initiative requires careful analysis of the content applicable as well as indicators of progress that a community of lay people can understand and use. The rest is process and how to guide it, and comes next.

Attend to process

A glaring need is attention to process. What is the route for the poor and powerless person to gain a little more control over her circumstances? How may the environment be influenced to allow a dependent drinker acquire even slightly stronger command over his alcohol consumption? Far too little action is driven by the people affected and their communities. The science on how they do succeed grows slowly because it relates to process. People who do not understand how processes can be generated and nurtured, and progress measured, tend not to pay attention to this aspect in their plans.

Plans for development should be obliged to spell out the community or population processes that they expect will be generated, in the course of achieving desired results.

Local action options

Individual change is easier when the surrounding milieu facilitates it. National policies are one means for making the setting in which we live facilitate desired behaviours. National policies work primarily through their impact on the immediate milieu of everyday life. But there are actions that local groups and communities can undertake to create changes in their own locality.

Taking control over set patterns of expenditure, is an example. It is difficult for a family to break out of programmed ways of consumer spending that operate in their community. But a change in the whole community allows families to alter habits more easily.

Work for collective progress

We noted previously a tendency for some people in a 'porous' community to keep others from progressing. Those who undertake development work, in a squalid overcrowded housing estate for instance, must take note of this. To develop, individuals and families will have to learn how to insulate themselves from the others who wish to drag them back down. The recognised solution is to move away from or escape from this setting. But a different strategy is to work primarily for collective improvement.

Address local agents that undermine

Who undermines progress of a community? The range of agents is wide. Those who exploit the poor are many and they are an obvious force in keeping a poor community from progressing. Many of these agents are outside the community but within reach. Distant forces are pervasive commercial influences. The most relevant of these are the global alcohol trade and similar others. So also the world's movie makers, story writers, film stars, musicians and the rest – who too set norms and create fashions, often for no commercial gain, which contribute to promoting greater alcohol consumption in far away places. The only practical local community response available is to recognise and immunise itself against these influences, whether they relate to alcohol consumption or other manipulated desires.

A good measure of obstruction to collective development comes from within poor communities too. Many such neighbourhood impediments are created by the families and individuals who are least able to progress. They may not like to be left behind while others advance. Some of them will be tempted to prevent others from outdoing them. Among those who are most likely to be resistant to change, and to obstruct change because they have little scope for progress, are people from families where there is chronic dependence on alcohol. Poverty alleviation efforts should spend relatively more effort on families that are least able to envisage an improvement in their lives. Engaging them will require new approaches.

Create community shifts in symbols of status

Our spending is governed mostly by 'artificial wants', after our basic needs are met – and often even before. Having our spending governed by such requirements is of little consequence if we are not short of income for basic needs. But it is disastrous if we are poor. By 'artificial requirements' I mean things that are desired more for what we expect to show the world through them than what we want to get directly from them, like keeping up with fashions.

Individuals who fail to adhere to norms of fashion are rarely admired. The desire to show conformity with the latest trends exists among the poor as well as the rich. Norms cannot be flouted by individuals, and require a community wide move, to change. When a fair number of people recognise the effect of following transient fashions, they can try to create a shared shift of values.

Address sources of fashions and symbols

It is not easy to change fashions and symbols by addressing the sources. Most fashions are set globally and are out of reach of ordinary human society. But for the poor community, there is a more local source of fashion – namely, the conduct of local rich people. How we are guided to follow the habits of local trend-setters is easier to recognise and to change. We may even try to change the behaviour of local trendsetters, who can more easily be reached than global sources of fashions.

Test specific interventions

A range of interventions to test different ways of addressing the interaction between alcohol and poverty can readily be formulated, based on existing knowledge and experience. These can be set out with a clear underlying theoretical premise to test, to allow later dissemination of the successful approaches. Details of how these have been put into operation are described elsewhere (Samarasinghe, 2005). Successful application has been in a limited range of settings but the interventions are based on technical or theoretical premises that are applicable across settings, and not dependent on local realities. Several strategies are available to put to the test.

1. *An example of a premise to test would be, 'Communities can be guided to reduce significantly the money spent on alcohol, by addressing the determinants of heavy alcohol expenditure'. Interventions to test this out in varied deprived communities can readily be designed. A starting list of potentially relevant determinants can be derived from experiences available already. This approach can even be added as an experimental component to some current development interventions. Engaging communities to address their alcohol expenditure is one of many possible interventions.*

2. *A different example from the first is, 'Taking away the permission for people to harass others when intoxicated can lead to improved results in community poverty alleviation efforts'. The technology to implement this exists already, but only in a limited number of settings.*
3. *'Learning to manage income can reduce poverty' is a different option. The emphasis here can be especially on how to handle episodic income or what exceeds the regular amount that a person or family is used to handling. The tendency is for such money to disappear along the alcohol drain, because this is the readymade channel. Alternative routes for spending are all unfamiliar. This is particularly important in farming communities that find a relatively large amount of money in hand at harvest time and nothing left after a few weeks – although the next harvest may come only in several months.*
4. *Uncontrolled and unaffordable expenditure on special events and celebrations is an area worthy of 'development' attention, again through specifically targeted intervention. The outlay for one celebratory event can devastate the entire future of a family. Such expenses are heavily on show-off, especially by demonstrating a free flow of alcohol. Although an individual family can not overturn established norms and standards, a collective effort within a community allows all members to take control over such profligacy.*

The foregoing are only a few examples of the numerous local action possibilities that emerge from matters dealt with in this paper. All of them can be designed in ways that will allow robust application across a wide variety of countries. Successful implementation of these approaches requires skill in nurturing communal processes. These are rather easy to develop, with accurate training, even among facilitators with only basic formal education.

Malawi – Photo: Eli Gunnvor Grønsdal



Conclusions and recommendations

Poverty is not just low income. Nor are poor people a uniform and homogeneous mass, whose development needs are all the same. But some common characteristics that apply to poor living conditions can be recognised, such as the lack of boundaries leading to others intruding into personal life, aspirations being limited and extra income tending to flow uncontrollably along readymade unproductive channels – especially on alcohol use. There are forces within and outside poor communities that contribute to ensuring that they do not escape from poverty.

The impact of alcohol on human development is not only on health and economic matters but also on general wellbeing – including healthy social relating. Alcohol is a significant contributor to maintaining and worsening economic difficulties and it likely plays a role in generating poverty too. It keeps poor people collectively poor. Alcohol consumption is driven strongly by ritual and symbolic pressures and not just by the desire for intoxication. Huge alcohol expenses impact not only on the families of heavy consumers but also on the community as a whole. Social customs associated with alcohol use ensure that those who consume little or no alcohol have to subsidize those who consume more.

There is a major synergy between alcohol use and poverty in damaging people's wellbeing, including their physical health. The combined influence of these two factors often has disastrous impact. A particular example is the permission that the intoxicated person is given, to interfere in the affairs of others. This social practice causes heightened harm in poorer settings – where the associated overcrowding allows intrusion into each other's personal lives. The combined effect on the powerless is appalling.

Evidence based measures for reducing alcohol consumption in economically better off countries are likely to have beneficial impacts on poor countries too. These policy actions are unevenly in operation across the globe. Benefit will result from wider adoption of recommended or evidence based policies that are now applied mostly in rich countries.

Actions to reduce poverty pay relatively too little attention to modifying people's spending habits. These are governed by local and remote influences that can be modified by successful collective action. This has been particularly evident in relation to special events and celebrations. Alcohol provides a good 'entry point' for engaging communities to start a process of positive change or development. This includes taking control over their established patterns of expenditure.

People reduce their collective alcohol expenditure, when guided to address the determinants of use. Examples of local or community action that does just that are available and the methodologies can be applied widely because they are technically driven, rather than based on idiosyncratic local factors. And these can serve as a model to address other determinants of poverty.

Responses to poverty, alcohol and their combined effects on human development would do well to consider the following recommendations:

- *Poverty reduction strategy papers should spell out clearly their underlying assumptions and premises and be comprehensive in their approach. There should be greater attention to the great variety and diversity of people and communities classified as 'poor'.*
- *Comprehensive strategies should include attention to common factors that impede progress of poor families and communities, and ways of overcoming these. Alcohol is an example of such factors, while the tendency for people in a crowded community to obstruct progress of others is another.*
- *Poverty reduction interventions must include ways of improving management of limited resources. Unaffordable expenses on special events and celebrations and on substances such as alcohol are examples of things that can readily be changed.*
- *Proposed poverty reduction interventions should spell out clearly the processes that they propose to generate, within families, communities and society at large, through which their expected results are to be reached.*
- *Local or community level initiatives with potential for dissemination across a wide variety of settings and cultures should be included for testing as part of broad poverty reduction initiatives. These will complement the existing macro- and micro-level initiatives that are mostly in place, by addressing a level in-between.*
- *Evidence based alcohol-specific measures presently applied mostly in a few of the wealthier countries must be applied widely.*
- *Local or community based approaches that have already demonstrated potential to reduce alcohol problems should be disseminated beyond their present limited areas of application. The potential of alcohol focussed initiatives, to allow other determinants of poverty to be brought to light and addressed by communities, should be exploited.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Some of the ideas that are set out here developed during collaboration, in 2002/2003, with Bergljot Baklien (at the time affiliated to the Norwegian Institute for Rural and Urban Research) and Øystein Bakke of FORUT, Norway, in the course of a study on alcohol and poverty in Sri Lanka, sponsored by FORUT, ADD. I am grateful for comments on a previous version of this paper from Øystein Bakke and Dag Endal.