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REDUCING ALCOHOL HARM: *things we can do*



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.*

REDUCING ALCOHOL HARM: things we can do
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1. Introduction

This booklet is not about theory. But effective action does require accurate understanding of issues. Such analysis is kept to a bare minimum here. More can be found in a complementary publication, 'Strategies to Address Alcohol Problems' and the website of FORUT's ADD program; Alcohol, Drugs and Development: www.add-resources.org

Things that are undertaken by people, rather than governments, are sometimes referred to as 'community responses'. This booklet is a guide to such actions but it is not a cookbook. Successful results are dependent on selecting not only the right approaches, based on understanding basic principles, but also appropriate and realistic targets to aim for, based on existing conditions and the resources available.

Even one person who wishes to contribute should be able to choose how best to translate her interest into feasible as well as useful action. Much interest and goodwill is available to improve society, but we don't get adequate results because we have no clear idea of what even one person can do, to make a change. We are often reluctant to try because we think we lack the resources to do something effective. We sometimes start and give up because we discover that our plans are not practical or they lead nowhere.

This booklet is for someone who is interested in learning how to make even his smallest action count. It is not for someone who wants to learn about alcohol problems and the evidence for different options for action. The links suggested in the first paragraph provide access to the theoretical bases of the actions proposed here.

How to use this booklet

Whoever wishes to make practical use of this booklet should first go over all of the content – it is not a long document. If we find that the approach outlined makes sense, the next step is to see what suggestions to start with. The guiding principles are given in the first four chapters. The last chapter sets out the action steps to take. We need to have a clear picture of the broad social changes needed and then to check whether each small action contributes to a shift in that desired direction. The strategic thrusts are spelt out.

The best start is with actions that can be included in our daily routines. The idea is to do small things – ask a question, make a comment, share some small idea – at every suitable opportunity. These are guided by an understanding of the general direction in which we want to create a social shift. Suggestions are provided of what small responses to look for. Individuals can start things off but they should look for changes appropriate to the size of their intervention. A larger number of individuals, or an organization, can aim to achieve bigger results. A person or group that is strongly committed to getting results will take the trouble to keep brief notes of action and progress, as recommended in the text.

Malawi – Photo: Eli Gunnvor Grønsdal



2. WHY IS A RESPONSE NEEDED?

Most people will, if asked, say that alcohol causes much harm to individuals and society but that it also has many benefits. Very few will be able to quantify these or even to weigh them accurately against each other. Providing figures or numbers to quantify the reported harm and benefits allows accurate comparison of the two and also their size relative to other agents. But figures are always subject to dispute and doubt.

Only a brief account of different kinds of alcohol-related harm is given here. The exact quantification of these is problematic, but we must attempt to do this as relevant to our setting – whether a small community or a large country. Locally applicable impacts have greater meaning than abstract figures for populations.

Death, disease and disability

Higher death rates and disabilities from injuries, violence, poisoning, cirrhosis, haemorrhagic stroke, pancreatitis, cancers of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver and breast, dependence and behavioural and mental disorders and, in many cultures, suicide are associated with alcohol consumption.

Many deaths to which alcohol contributes are not officially added to the tally. Over 800,000 people were reported to have killed themselves in the year 2000. Alcohol dependence is associated with suicide. But the proportion to which it can be causally linked is indeterminable. So these deaths do not figure in the usual calculations.

Because alcohol kills and disables at a relatively young age its impact on Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) is relatively much higher than that of other major causes of premature deaths. In the WHO study of the contributors to the Global Burden of Disease, alcohol is said to account for about four per cent. This is of similar scale to that of tobacco and high blood pressure. As the report itself points out, the alcohol computation takes into account only the harm to the individual alcohol users. Harm to others through the individual who has used alcohol is not taken into account. But it should be.

Harm to others

Harm to the individual user is nearly always the focus in discussions on the negative effects of alcohol. When alcohol problems are portrayed as the result of an individual's genetic or other predisposition, we all tend to forget the harm to people from other people's use. This is kept conveniently off the agenda.

Victims of alcohol related accidents are, for instance, not only the intoxicated. A huge number of people, abused by those who are intoxicated, do not get counted either. What we often count on the plus side of alcohol, alleged 'loss of inhibitions', is what allows victimisation of the weak by those who are drunk. Most victims of alcohol's damaging side are probably children and, in many cultures, women. Their suffering is camouflaged by the overall mood of fun, or freedom from oppressive norms, created around intoxication. Thus the victimisation, ironically enough, is put down on the credit side.

An issue that is often unnoticed is the injustice that alcohol permits to be inflicted on the most powerless members of society. And those who break the rules to victimize others 'under the influence of alcohol' are

nearly always the more powerful. So alcohol provides 'cover' for the strong to victimize the weak. A husband is more often allowed to get away with abusing his wife if he is known to have consumed alcohol. A wife is rarely allowed this 'drunken privilege'. A person who is abused too tends to feel less upset if the abuser did so after taking alcohol, rather than without such a 'reason'.

Economic problems

The most important indirect harm from alcohol on family and community wellbeing in poorer settings is probably through its economic impact. In the poorest families the money spent on alcohol is rather a large proportion of the family's earnings. This is often underestimated. The cost of substance use in abjectly poor communities is appallingly large. The damaging impact on the most deprived families, of resources being thus taken away from the little available for food and other basics, should be constantly emphasised – until its real scale is more widely recognised.

Underestimation of the cost results from several mechanisms. One of these is simply the deliberate or unwitting under-reporting of costs in self-reports. We can at least make a correction for such underestimates, for we know that this tendency operates. But there are other mechanisms that lead to 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 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.

In events where alcohol expenses are regularly pooled heavy users costs are borne by the 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 immediately 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 contribution to the daily alcohol purchases of heavy drinkers comes from their wives, who contribute part of their earnings for the man's alcohol, generally 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 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.

Countervailing benefits

Harm from alcohol is not the only consideration in deciding whether we need to do something about alcohol use. Benefits ascribed to it should also be tallied. Most people would list among the benefits pleasure and conviviality produced by alcohol. Economic activity and employment generation are other benefits emphasised. And from the health angle, there is the lower mortality associated with light to moderate consumption of alcohol, in some population groups. These should be examined critically to see how much of a benefit they indeed are. Only items that survive critical scrutiny should be included in the equation, when working out the optimal response to alcohol.

Pleasure and fun

When people learn in whatever way to rely on alcohol to relax, enjoy, or to perform socially, they lose out. This comes about from the gradual association of alcohol use with the mood that they want to achieve. After a time alcohol becomes a necessary condition for achieving a particular mood. A person who learns to associate alcohol with being carefree or vivacious at a party soon begins to associate the mood with alcohol use.

Learning to rely on alcohol for desired moods or ways of behaving gradually restricts the person's range of enjoyments. In time, alcohol occasions become the only occasions experienced or interpreted as enjoyable, or relaxing. When people reach this stage of reliance on alcohol, the pleasure they get from life is in reality restricted or reduced.

There is yet another proviso to attach to accounts of alleged pleasure from alcohol. Wellbeing during drinking sessions is derived in good part from the permission to be free. 'It does not matter now, you're drunk'. But wellbeing that is achieved simply by exploiting opportunities to transgress ordinary social norms has its costs. Social rules and norms serve to protect the weak from victimisation by the strong. In situations where alcohol provides 'time out' from usual social rules, the weak are more at risk. Improved wellbeing through alcohol use for some individuals is then bought at the cost of impaired wellbeing for the non-user or the weaker alcohol user.

In the wellbeing equation, the 'enjoyment' of the user may be put down on the credit side. But the debit side, where wellbeing is purchased at the cost of others' ill being, is too readily ignored.

On two counts then the alleged pleasure from alcohol use doesn't appear too attractive. Firstly, we found that even the users who perceive genuinely improved subjective wellbeing when intoxicated get it at the cost of restricting their own repertoire of fun and relaxation. Secondly, we note the negative consequences on others of the more dominant users' fun.

Health benefits

Undoubted and significant association between lower mortality and the consumption of, say, 10 grams of alcohol a day, compared to no alcohol consumption, is found in several studies. This finding applies not to the human population in general but only to people over 45 years old living in affluent countries.

The idea that alcohol is good for the heart, quantity unspecified, is widespread. If rigorous enough evidence were available of this, there still remains the problem of making public or private recommendations to drink for health. When, at some future date, the criteria for causality are rigorously satisfied, recommendations on alcohol consumption have nonetheless to be cautiously made. Pronouncements made to individuals can have opposite or paradoxical results on societies. Most authorities are conscious of the harm that can result from going public with a message appropriate for a selected group of individuals at special risk. Although this is well known it is not respected enough in practice.

The time has not yet come for cheap generic medicinal alcohol to be sold through pharmacies or drug stores, even to protect the hearts of older people in Western countries. When it does, the rest of the alcohol products in the market may suddenly lose their glamour. And population consumption may paradoxically begin to decline.

Malawi – Photo: Dag Endal



3. THE RANGE OF COMMUNITY RESPONSES NEEDED

We often advocate responses based on our motivation to 'do something'. Recognising the gravity of alcohol-related harm, we may be motivated to do something to prevent it. When motivated, our commonest response is to see how we can generate awareness and concern among others. We want to make others aware of the harm. There is an assumption that our motivation will spread to others when they too know the reasons behind it.

We must take more trouble to understand how problem alcohol use is generated, maintained and increased. After we work out the likely determinants, we can think of ways to address them. A model or scheme of things is necessary for continually improving our understanding. Such a scheme will allow us to develop and test new and potentially effective interventions.

In time our list of determinants should become more robust. And the items will become rather more hierarchically arranged, based on the order in which they should be addressed or the relative cost-benefit of addressing each.

Ways to reduce harm

There are some broad end-points that are known to reduce alcohol problems. These can be summarised as follows.

- Delay initiation of use
- Reduce heavy alcohol use
- Minimise harmful patterns of consumption
- Reduce population consumption
- Change harmful behaviours associated with alcohol use

These objectives can be recommended with confidence. They are not just logically desired end-points, but supported by evidence as well. To achieve these results, our communities have to start moving in a particular direction. There are underlying community-wide changes that could encourage the achievement of many of these results. These milieu changes have to be worked out logically and then put to the test in real life.

Our strategic action should try to address such underlying factors or determinants leading to the desired impacts listed above.

The community as a whole has to shift in a particular direction. The factors that will lead to delayed initiation, reduced aggregate consumption and so on, apply to the community as a whole. Changes in determinants that communities can strive to achieve, for a start, could be as follows:

1. *Reducing the attractiveness of the image of alcohol*
2. *Reducing unfair privileges attached to alcohol use*
3. *Improving recognition of the real harm from alcohol use*
4. *Encouraging quitting or reduction or change in pattern of alcohol use*
5. *Counteracting the forces that promote consumption*
6. *Preventing the 'alcoholization' of all social events and activities*
7. *Appropriately restricting availability*
8. *Encouraging implementation of useful policies, locally and beyond*

In attempts to reduce alcohol-related harm, the role that a community can play is not greatly emphasised. But communities have a major role. The preceding paragraph listed changes that a community should strive to achieve. Communities, more than policymakers, are effective in achieving locally the changes listed. Some are of course more difficult to achieve than others. But responses to reduce alcohol-related problems should not be left to remote 'policymakers' alone.

The list is not in a particular order of importance. Nor is it a recommended sequence for implementation. So each community can address the issues that it sees as priority.

4. CHOOSING SUITABLE ACTIONS

Whatever actions we choose must be consistent with some basic principles that underlie effective community responses. To implement good community interventions we must learn community work too, not just about alcohol. A narrow or exclusive interest in alcohol is often a disadvantage for someone trying to mobilise communities.

The community we work with can be a group of people or families who live close to each other or meet together on a regular basis. The 'community' that we choose can even be a few people or groups that we regularly meet. We can easily try to influence the opinions and conduct of just a small group of friends to which we belong. Some may want to select a school, a workplace, a village or larger group to interact with. Our actions can range from quiet personal interventions with our regular associates to systematic formal efforts with a relatively large population. Ideas presented here will need to be modified according to the scale and scope of what we choose to do.

Community based work

All community-based activities should follow the principles relevant to this kind of work. For instance, nearly everybody recognises that success is more readily achieved when the people concerned 'own' the activity rather than having to follow others' instructions. There are other principles to follow, not commonly spelt out. One of these is that people should be involved in continually looking for desired impacts.

In generating community action, the initial focus should change according to the people or group through whom activity is to be started. A youth group may not be particularly interested in the health effects, for example. But they may be moved by the harm to children of poorer families or simply the potential for creating a change. A good way to start is by discussing what we can usefully do together. One reason for taking action on alcohol should be the fact that there are effective interventions available.

If we wish to work with a relatively large group of people we should try to link up with other individuals or an organization with whom to work. Agencies already working actively to reduce alcohol problems in a community are likely to respond more readily and enthusiastically than others. Their interest is a great asset. A drawback with agencies working in the field of alcohol problems is that they will already be committed to a particular way of responding to alcohol problems. And a new initiative will only be taken as an opportunity simply to do more of what they've been doing.

There are people and agencies working on issues other than alcohol problems, who see the enormous relevance of alcohol to their own work. Those working broadly for 'development' or poverty reduction are examples. They often see the relevance of action in the alcohol field. But they may think that there is nothing effective to do or that the only response available is the daunting task of trying to make heavy users quit. They are sometimes reluctant to take alcohol on their agenda also because they feel they are not 'exemplary' – namely, that they too consume alcohol. This attitude arises from the idea that prevention of alcohol problems is equivalent to advocating total abstinence by all. This idea must be countered vigorously. If efforts to promote correct attitudes to alcohol use exclude those who consume it, little benefit can be expected.

Sponsors and other allies

There is globally an increasing participation of business interests in 'social service' type of work. How genuine these are is not our interest here, it is rather how they may be harnessed. Private enterprises are not only the big businesses. For work in a small community one local businesswoman or man may be an adequate sponsor. A good entry to use in dialogue with them is the harm that is caused by alcohol and the fact that effective community responses are available. A difficulty with private sponsors is that they are susceptible to persuasion by commercial alcohol interests to stop their support.

The state health, education, and social service sectors have direct responsibility to deal with aspects of alcohol problems. Alcohol related work is relevant for government agencies, if any, dealing with poverty reduction or community development. The possibility of engaging such agencies is worth exploring. But we may find that we are obliged to choose activities that are determined by them.

Scale or scope

An expectation in this document is to demonstrate that there are useful things that we can do even with no extra resources. So the actions that are spelt out are rather small. The emphasis is on feasibility and ensuring the best possible results from our efforts. If we have rather more resources than the minimal amount assumed in this document, we should try to enlarge on the scope of actions presented here. The ideas here can then be used as a way of training people working with large communities and can be supplemented from the sources mentioned earlier.

Sri Lanka – Photo: Dag Endal



5. COMMUNITY ACTION TO ADDRESS ALCOHOL PROBLEMS

Despite the enormous variation between communities, some general principles for action can be defined. This is the technical component that cuts across communities but these have to be applied in ways that fit in with local realities. The first four of the action steps that follow are of a general nature and the rest address more specialized issues.

Step 1:

Understanding what we need to do

Action: Discuss the need to change some underlying social contributors, in order to reduce alcohol problems. We need a fair grasp of these factors, or determinants, to be able to induce others to examine them. Understanding can be improved by discussing the factors listed below, under 'Comments', with at least one other interested person. Another way to improve appreciation of the meaning of each factor is to read the whole of this chapter and then add your own analysis.

Note down the gist of your discussions (or of personal reflection, if you are setting about things alone). Which of the factors listed are the most important to address in the chosen groups or community? Are there important determinants that cannot be classified under these headings, which you want to add to the list?

Comments:

We need first to work out how to reduce alcohol problems. Understanding the determinants of alcohol problems is an essential first step. These are few and were described previously (chapter 3).

1. Reducing the attractiveness of the image of alcohol
2. Reducing unfair privileges attached to alcohol use
3. Improving recognition of the real harm from alcohol use
4. Encouraging quitting or reduction or change in pattern of alcohol use
5. Counteracting the forces that promote consumption
6. Preventing the 'alcoholization' of all social events and activities
7. Appropriately restricting availability
8. Encouraging implementation of useful policies, locally and beyond

We must analyse and understand at increasing depth what each of these means. Our grasp will continue to improve as we proceed. Take one of these as example – reducing unfair privileges attached to alcohol use. This results from acceptance of so-called misbehaviour after alcohol use. Violence, aggression and abuse are, in some communities, accepted from the intoxicated. Such tacit approval is a socially given 'privilege' for consuming alcohol.

The factors listed can be treated superficially or we can try to keep improving our depth of understanding. Our activities should be directed towards creating all of the changes listed here, although not necessarily to the same level nor in this particular order. Whether we want to do

something as just one individual or as part of a group or agency, we still need to study and understand these elements. One way to do this is to discuss things. If we are working alone we can do our own thinking and analysis. There are several ideas that this booklet provides too, in the following steps.

Proposed action must try to address all or most of the determinants listed here – especially the first five or so, which are more powerful determinants. We will have to help people to monitor their own progress in bringing about these desired 'underlying' changes. Before we take any action, we should first read the whole of this booklet.

Step 2:

Checking where the community stands

Action: Explore and learn about the status of the community, in relation to the factors listed in the previous step. You will get an incomplete and rather vague picture. You may even have to resort to guessing, with regard to some issues. But you should try to figure out the present status of the community on each of our factors – and note how you decided about each one. You can keep improving this assessment as things move along.

You must try to make at least some notes at this point. Making even brief notes as you go along is a major contributor to later success. Get the best possible estimate of total alcohol consumption of the group or community concerned, and keep it recorded for periodic comparison.

Comments:

Having got an idea of the directions in which our community must move, we must check where our particular group or community stands now. If we are working alone or informally we can simply keep asking people, whenever the opportunity arises naturally, their opinions and beliefs about alcohol, its benefits and harms, and what causes alcohol problems. We can try to introduce issues relevant to the subjects in our list (in step 1) and determine the strongest or most widespread opinions. If we have enough resources, we can do a more formal study of where the community stands.

The intention is to find out what people in a given community or group think about the different aspects of alcohol use that we aim to address. The information we get has then to be organized under the different headings that we proposed.

If people all smile unthinkingly when the word alcohol is even mentioned, that too is a reflection of the image they have of alcohol. It reflects a shared public image that consuming alcohol is jolly. This is relevant to our first subject, 'the attractiveness of the image of alcohol'. One conclusion we can then note is that nearly everybody considers alcohol a source of fun. Similarly we may find, say, that most people think that drinking much alcohol is a sign of toughness or that they think it stupid to drink to the point where one feels unsteady on one's feet. These are all examples of possible findings on the community's perceptions related to the image of alcohol use.

On the subject of privileges, we may find, say, that two thirds of people feel that men should not be given any excuse for being nasty to their wives when intoxicated. Or we may discover that the majority thinks that drunken individuals are not responsible for their actions and may be partly excused for bad behaviour at the time. Similarly, if nobody recognizes the different subtle ways in which commercial forces influence us through the media, the finding is relevant to the fifth factor – related to, ‘forces that promote alcohol consumption’. In this way we must seek to get at least a patchy picture of the community, in relation to the factors in which we are interested.

Step 3:

Kindling an interest

Action: Share with people what you found about their own ideas and habits regarding alcohol. Findings can be fed back relatively formally or more informally. How you found out the community's opinions will determine how you share the findings. Keep asking people what they feel about their own community's shared views.

Comments:

Generating an interest in reducing alcohol problems is not difficult. Making interest lead to action is harder. We are generally reluctant to start something new. One reason is that we don't know what is useful to do, and another that we think we can't change anything even if tried. A third is that we have learned to ignore important problems because they have existed for a long time and we have got used to them. Or we may have the impression that the required action will make us look odd or involve trouble.

The real activity is simpler and more interesting. The community change process can be initiated unnoticed, by even one person. The process starts with people recognizing and questioning collective opinions and views. Most of the beliefs that lead to increased alcohol use are not even recognized as such by the person who holds them.

It takes little energy to stimulate a community to start taking small steps in the right direction. Our action is best started with repeated dialogues about what we discovered about that particular community through our previous step.

Let's assume for example that three fourths of people had felt that a man who abuses his wife should not be strongly blamed if he was drunk at the time. When people learn that this is what they believe, it is possible to start the process of questioning. Is this idea acceptable or sensible? Does it encourage violence after alcohol, because people can then take cover under the excuse of alcohol? We can sometimes add information of our own. An example will be, say, people assuming that the money spent on alcohol in their community is trivial. If our community is relatively poor, the reality is often that a significant part of income is expended on alcohol – even though they may believe the amount to be trivial. In such an instance we may be able to question the existing opinion by doing a bit of calculation with them.

Another example is people discovering how they are moulded into seeing alcohol use as a source of great pleasure and fun. Once they recognize the influences that promote this picture, such as repeated media portrayals or alcohol industry sponsored events, they may be tempted to take action to protect their community – especially children. Knowledge or new insight that we can add is a stimulus to change.

Step 4:

Addressing determinants: selecting things to start with

Action: Encourage people in the community to make a change in one or more of the factors that aroused a response among them. Once they decide to change anything, ask them to figure out how to measure progress. Pick the relevant subject from the steps that follow and apply what it says.

Comment:

We have a list of underlying factors to address. How we start and how far we progress addressing any one or more of these, depends on local conditions and our own skills and resources. The order in which action should proceed cannot be fixed beforehand.

The activities in the previous step would have led to some reaction from people. They may have become interested in the idea that alcohol serves as an excuse for being nasty to others and that maybe we should change this. Or they may have been struck by the proportion of their own income spent on alcohol and felt that this should be reduced. Greater interest may have been aroused by discovering how the media create a highly attractive image of alcohol in the minds of children.

We need now to focus on the issue or two that generated most interest. We can start asking whether we should change the situation with regard to a particular matter. Can we try to sensitise our children to the way that the media make them see alcohol as a wonderful? Whatever subject people are most interested in can be picked, to use as example for how a community can change things.

How this can be done is given briefly in the steps that follow. They address the specific issues or determinants that we need to address. Although this booklet places 'Reducing the attractiveness of the image of alcohol' first (Step 5), our community could well prefer another entry. We can take up any one (or more) of the following steps as we wish.

Step 5:

Reducing the attractiveness of the image of alcohol

Action: Study the ideas spelt out below, under 'Comments', in this step. Then look for opportunities to discuss and spread them as suggested here. The end result should be that the community stops unthinkingly and groundlessly adding glamour, attraction and magical feelings to alcohol consumption.

Keep at least a brief note of what you say and do, and how far opinions change. Changes are initially only a chance remark or observation, in keeping with what you have introduced. Discuss with your colleagues about the progress made and the obstacles to further change. Keep providing continuing inputs relevant to this theme even while other issues are taken up later.

Ask, 'Is the image of alcohol now becoming less grand and wonderful?' And then, 'How can we find out?' and 'Which of our actions most contributed to this progress?' Encourage people to note down all the ways in which an attractive image is built around alcohol and to challenge this image through their own understanding and experience. Record progress and share this with people. Celebrate if you discover that people are now less impressed with the alleged fine consequences of alcohol use. It implies that you, together with people in that community, have succeeded in changing an ingrained opinion.

Comment:

Communities can readily recognise, when appropriately guided, the things that they say, do and think, which serve to add glamour, pleasure and positive symbolic meanings to alcohol. An enlightened community can learn to remove this extra embellishment that they unthinkingly add, which indirectly encourages greater alcohol use.

Engaging

One action is to engage people in working out how to reduce the attractiveness we collectively built up. An effortless process where the group or community continually addresses this issue has to be set in motion. Introducing this subject from time to time as part of conversation is a good beginning. Continued action with the community should explore this theme a little more each time. Questioning encourages interested people to make fun of the exciting image collectively built up around alcohol.

How should communities make alcohol use appear less attractive and magical, especially to its young people? One important step is for them to recognise the things that they do now that add to its positive image. A process can start as a result of a few people regularly asking questions.

Learning through doing

Within a few conversations, of questioning and challenging, the community begins to discover where it stands. People understand how they collectively make alcohol glamorous, and also redefine their own relationship with alcohol. It soon becomes possible to help the community to recognise the different influences that contribute to making alcohol appear needlessly great and wonderful.

Let's say a community came to the realisation that they should try to reduce the attractiveness of the image of alcohol among children and youth. They need then to learn how to reverse the influences that create this special image or aura surrounding alcohol. Because they have only recently begun to recognise the various contributors to the image, it takes some time for them to discover the full range of contributors. As

they go on, they discover how they too see or refer to alcohol. When they begin to notice the special words they use to refer to alcohol, or the feelings they express about intoxication, they realise how alcohol is continuously blown up as wonderful or highly potent. It is a small step then to change their own words and actions that contribute to this happening.

Checking progress

The community has to look for appropriate indicators of progress. How can we verify whether there is a change in the glamour and attraction of the image of alcohol? People could decide, for example, to measure the extent to which alcohol is automatically associated with ideas of joy and pleasure. This can be done in a formal systematic way or quite informally. An appropriate indicator may simply be how much people smile unthinkingly, on just hearing the word 'alcohol'. How far do people now think it a sign of strength to consume large amounts of alcohol? Changes like these can be checked and noted even without a formal research activity. The challenge is to help the community to recognise the smallest progress.

Eventual impacts

Seemingly trivial actions add up to making a significant shift. In communities that make good progress, alcohol ceases to be glorified and mystified. People gradually begin to realise that their own experience of alcohol drinking, and intoxication, is not as pleasant or magical as they themselves previously portrayed, or even believed. Fear of expressing their true experience gradually disappears, when they realise that there are others too whose subjective experience is similar to theirs. This is, in a sense, liberation.

In communities that make good progress on changing the positive image, alcohol is no longer treated as some special and wonderful substance. People realise that some don't like the effect of alcohol at all. The symbolic value of alcohol too comes down. They become better at guiding others, especially their children, as to how alcohol is needlessly promoted as wonderful – and how this can be counteracted.

Sierra Leone – Photo: Øystein Bakke



Step 6:

Reducing unfair privileges attached to alcohol use

Action: Digest what is spelt out in this step. Then look for opportunities to spread the ideas suggested here. As a change from the previous step you may try to approach this subject simply by measuring what you want to change – the extent to which the excuse, 'being drunk' is accepted. Your community may instead prefer to start in the same way as with the previous subject – by first discussing and analysing the idea.

Keep at least a brief note of what you say and do, and how far opinions and habits change. Discuss the progress made and the obstacles to overcome. Misbehaviour when inebriated tends to change relatively quickly. Note progress and encourage those from the community to share it with others.

Comment:

The idea of unfair privileges is easier to understand than the attractiveness of the image of alcohol. The most important examples are readily visible, so progress is easier to measure. The commonest allowances given to alcohol users are permission to be aggressive or rude, freedom from critical judgements and permission to ignore safety of oneself and others. More subtle privileges are noticed as we become more aware.

The basis of these privileges is that users 'lose control' and are not really aware of what they do when intoxicated. But we should recognize that societies do successfully hold alcohol users too to certain norms of behaviour. What drunken individuals are allowed to do in one society is not allowed in another and they all manage to keep within these limits, which differ according to gender, ethnicity and age of the drinker. In many societies, a woman is not permitted to 'lose control' when drunk as much as a man is.

Engaging

Action can start in many ways. We can experiment with different entries with each subject. One possibility is to start with measurement, because this is often a good way to initiate change as well. When a community starts to assess the extent of a problem, that itself leads to action. We may report the number of instances of unacceptable 'drunken' behaviour seen in the past month. People in most communities are able to describe such situations. And if we analyse the most frequent 'targets' of aggression, we will realise that they are mostly weaker individuals. This usually leads to an impulse to act.

Learning through doing

We may have started action by monitoring events. People readily agree that alcohol use should not be an excuse for unacceptable conduct, especially when they realize that intoxicated people generally pick the right individuals to target. This dialogue must happen in drinking settings. After a time, at least a few members in a group start saying that they should not allow weaker persons to be victimized simply because someone else was acting 'intoxicated'. People realise that it is not enough just to appeal to the relevant individuals to avoid getting drunk, which can even reinforce the idea that they cannot control their behaviour when drunk. They learn instead to gradually take away the permission for drunken misbehaviour.

Checking progress

Measuring change in acceptance of drunkenness as an excuse for misconduct is important. We can more easily measure changes in incidents of aggressive or violent behaviour after alcohol use, especially those in public. But the earlier, underlying, change must be measured as well. The measurement that a community chooses may not be ideal. But the best that the community is able to use is indeed the best. If we start in some way to check progress, our initial indicators can continually be refined.

Eventual impacts

One of the strongest impacts of community action on alcohol is reduction in 'alcohol-induced' aggression and indecency. This reduction should happen even if consumption stays the same. People learn that behaviour after alcohol use is very much open to modification by the environment. Peers in the drinking groups of habitual offenders can exert a powerful influence in curtailing their transgressions.

Step 7:

Improving recognition of the real harm from alcohol use

Action: First recall the harm that the community recognized as being caused by alcohol (from step 2). You have then to improve the depth of understanding of the harm that people already recognize, by adding to those that they already notice, including ideas described earlier (in Chapter 2).

Keep noting the progress. How widely is the increased recognition of the harm spreading? What are the resistances to the appreciation of real harm? Do people see impacts on the whole of the community, as opposed to the previous perception that harm was only to the consumer? Write these down, however uncertain your answers. An added measure in this step should be the assessment of overall alcohol consumption of the group or community concerned. This serves as a measure of the combined impact of all the steps listed here.

Comment:

The idea is to increase recognition of the kinds of harm that were previously not noticed, and the day to day impact of these on our lives. The community must appreciate how these affect the wellbeing of all its members. There has to be recognition of subtle harms too, such as the gradual restriction of things that give joy, as people become increasingly alcohol centred. A serious harm caused by alcohol is its role in making previously full and varied lives gradually more monotonous and dull. Some users in this stage can see the restriction of their repertoire of joyous events and times, when it is pointed out. But most do not. These persons tend instead to see that alcohol makes all occasions happy.

Creating change

Change is stimulated by appreciation of the scale of harm and from discovering harms that were previously not noticed. Do people better recognise, for example, the amount of money spent on alcohol? In more affluent communities this issue will not arouse as much concern as recognizing the narrowing of the range of happy occasions or the extent of injuries, disability and deaths caused by alcohol. The easiest action to consider is to see how the amount of alcohol consumed in total can be reduced.

Checking progress and eventual impacts

We can note evidence ranging from chance remarks to results of systematic enquiry. Are people beginning to appreciate better the extent of expenditure on alcohol? Do they realize that the money spent on alcohol is not only from the earnings of alcohol users but from subsidizing by others? Can they now see how the lives of those who seemingly enjoy and promote alcohol are monotonous remnants of previously happy and varied lives? Eventually, the community as a whole senses that people who feel good with alcohol are mainly the individuals who are not able to have a good time in its absence. Increasing numbers of people should begin to see the need for action to reduce the harm.

Step 8:

Encouraging quitting or reduction of use, or change in pattern of use

Action: Engage people, especially those from regular drinking groups, in discussions on whether they should continue their current patterns of consumption. Ask whether a reduction in consumption will decrease their enjoyment significantly or increase it. Are there a few individuals who keep pressing others to drink more alcohol than they really wish? Ask whether everybody in a group must drink heavily on every occasion to be part of the group. Could we on some days try to press everyone to drink less than usual?

Note changes in perception among drinking groups and in the community in general. Is there a shift towards questioning continued heavy consumption by all? Is there a shift of control, in drinking settings, away from the individuals who press others to consume beyond the point that they wish to stop? In addition to these contributory changes, you can also record the numbers of people who report reductions in use and by how much, as well as any that have quit. Individual anecdotes too should be noted.

Comment:

All alcohol users have to be encouraged to look critically at their own consumption. The common tendency is to focus on a few alcohol drinkers at the 'extreme' or severe end. Promoting reduction of use is not only to reduce problems. People should recognize that for many users, reducing alcohol consumption increases the enjoyment of drinking events. There will be some who do not see enough reason to justify changing their habitual consumption. But such persons should not impose their decision on others.

Engaging and changing current consumption

Results here are most effectively achieved through discussions among groups of people who drink together. Reducing collective consumption is the goal. Changes are needed in shared attitudes among all those who meet regularly 'over a drink', not just among the individuals who drink heavily. The group may also question unwritten rules such as the one that everybody must consume alcohol on every occasion that others do.

Community interventions must develop the right relationship to 'treatment' services too. Some users need medical help. A community may not, for instance, possess the special skills needed to support a heavy regular alcohol user who chooses to quit as the group's attitude changes. Access to the local medical service is then necessary.

Checking progress

We may want to check, for example, the conversation and habits in drinking settings. Is there less pressure to make everybody drink on every drinking occasion and to drink heavily? This is a relatively early indicator. The number of problem drinkers who significantly reduce alcohol use or quit is a distant end point. Reduced consumption that eventually results should be recorded. Reduction in overall consumption is money available for all to enjoy life, beyond the narrow confines of alcohol settings. But money that is no longer spent on alcohol tends to disappear unnoticed into other channels, so the benefit may not be noticed. A special effort is needed to keep track of such reductions.

Step 9:

Counteracting forces that promote increased consumption

Action: You need to sensitise people about the numerous influences that promote alcohol use. Encourage people to think of specific individuals among them who always make alcohol look good and great. At the same time draw attention to ways in which a positive image is created through messages, pictures and various other means that reach the community from outside, especially the media, 'entertainment' and 'hospitality' sectors. Generate discussion on how to counteract these pressures and inducements. Spread the feeling that people in the community should protect its members, especially younger members, from the effects of the bombardment of the community by external commercial forces.

Note the level of understanding of the different ways in which alcohol use and heavier use are promoted. Check whether people are beginning to express unhappiness about such happenings. Record how children are being guided about these external forces and their tactics.

Comment:

The forces that promote increased alcohol use include some alcohol users, local licit and illicit alcohol traders and the big alcohol trade in the distance. The actions of the global alcohol trade now reach remote corners of the world. Communities cannot stop the promotions of alcohol that come through the media, for instance. But they can try to reduce their impact. Increased understanding of how certain portrayals in the media make alcohol more appealing to young people, for example, can sensitize the community.

Any attempt to reduce alcohol consumption can provoke opposition from local forces that want to increase alcohol use. This opposition may be quite strong and open or quiet and insidious. What are the forces that promote increased consumption? Are there agents who want to prevent our community reducing its alcohol consumption?

Creating community process

People need to see how heavy alcohol consumption is generally portrayed as the norm. Just a few light-hearted comments about drinking inserted into television or film productions can plant ideas that take root among the viewers. Some individuals in the community too may be active in promoting alcohol and need to be countered.

Checking progress

Indicators of progress on this issue are relatively easy to work out. People's awareness of how images in the media influence community

norms is an example of early impact. Concern about this, and resistance to its influence, should follow. Evidence of success (or lack of progress) guides further action. Examples of questions that we should ask are, 'Do people now identify more clearly the few persons who make others drink more on drinking occasions?', 'Are we conscious of the members of our own group who constantly promote a positive and attractive image of alcohol through comments, jokes and banter?', 'Do people notice the crude and subtle ways in which some articles and pictures in newspapers and magazines, images in television shows and lyrics of songs promote alcohol use and a positive image about it?' and 'Are people now more resistant to these influences and do they take the trouble to minimize the impact of such promotions on the community – especially its children?'

Step 10: Preventing the 'alcoholization' of all social events and activities

Action: This is rather a straightforward subject. All you need do is make people look back and decide whether alcohol is becoming an increasingly central part of social occasions. If so, what should their concerns be? If they wish to reverse any such trend you should encourage them to monitor progress and use that as a way of deciding whether they are adopting the correct approach.

Comment:

The degree to which alcohol is 'integrated' or made part of different social activities influences the amount consumed. In some societies alcohol-using occasions are increasing. As the range of events that include alcohol increases, so does consumption. How does alcohol become increasingly the central part of social events? The process is often unwitting and nearly always unnoticed.

Creating change

Spreading understanding is a first step towards stimulating action. If people realize that alcohol has begun to play an increasing part in day to day life and that harm results from it, they may want to stop the trend. Community efforts to give a lesser place to alcohol are a sign of progress. A gradual demotion of the role of alcohol in social events reduces the consumption of current users and the uptake of alcohol by youth.

Step 11: Restricting availability as appropriate

Action: Ask the community what they can do about any ready and easy availability of alcohol that they see. Encourage people to keep records of the number of alcohol outlets and the times they operate. Attempts to reduce these, usually directed at the illicit trade, can lead to confrontation. Warn people of any risks of strife even if nothing hostile is initially planned.

Comment:

In a highly enlightened community consumption should not increase simply because alcohol is freely available. As things stand in the real world, the restriction of availability is a significant contributor to reducing consumption and problems. Increasing resentment towards the ready and unfettered availability of alcohol can itself lead to beneficial changes.

The options available to an individual community are few. Rural communities often have more success than the urban in dealing with the illicit alcohol trade. Some communities succeed in counteracting the illicit alcohol trade in their locality, at least for a time. This however requires hard work. The legal alcohol trade, of course, can hardly ever be restricted by local community action, unless that action is directed at changing the alcohol policy of the locality.

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Creating change

Developing the right indicators is one way of initiating community action. Early change is seen in resentment towards the trade in alcohol, for instance. So a good indicator of early progress may be an increased unhappiness among people about their powerlessness to prevent the free and ready availability of alcohol. Resistance to ready availability should reduce the risk of further increases of availability. The community response does not necessarily have to lead to open confrontation with the alcohol trade to bear results.

Step 12:

Encouraging the implementation of useful local and national policies

Action: You can read further about the evidence-based policies for reducing alcohol problems. Share these with members of the community as appropriate and note their level of interest. Encourage any interested members to examine ways in which they can contribute to progress beyond their community.

Comment:

Small communities have little power to create national policy changes. But improving awareness in our small communities should contribute to a wider recognition of useful policies and the better implementation of those that are in place. A community can also strive to achieve locally the results that policies are intended to achieve nationally. Some of the subjects discussed in earlier steps are aimed precisely at achieving this result.

Creating change

We can use opportunities that arise in the course of our discussions to educate people about policies that help reduce problems. Drawing attention to how existing policies are implemented is also helpful. If there are individuals who are interested in what happens nationally too, they may be encouraged to support efforts to improve conditions beyond their own community.

Step 13:

Putting things together

Community action will not magically lead to reduced alcohol problems, simply because that is its goal. The underlying changes outlined here have to be generated and nurtured, to lead to a reduction of problems. We had measures of progress in these under each step. But we must repeatedly monitor the overall level of consumption of the community or group as well. This should be assessed regularly and compared with previous assessments, including that done first (in step 2), as a way of checking the combined impact of all of the different elements addressed.

The factors given here, that a community should strive to change, are not too technical for any community to grasp. Progress is achieved by creating the right dialogue and nurturing the process of questioning and challenge within the community, as well as by providing new information. When things start moving, progress happens on several fronts. An important ingredient of success is a core of people with sustained interest and the ability to learn by testing things out.

Overall changes that begin to happen

When things start moving significantly on any of the fronts, the overall mood begins to change. A strong impetus may for instance be created by people noticing the tactics of a few among them and of commercial influences far beyond them, to make the community increasingly alcohol-centred. This development reinforces others. Alcohol begins to be demoted from its high perch. The perception that it is extraordinarily powerful in its ability to create pleasure, relaxation, 'forgetting' problems and stresses, better cardiac health and magical subjective experiences starts to change. We must keep track of this general shift in mood.

Resistances to progress

The process of a community awakening and taking charge of what happens in it is rarely allowed to proceed freely. The usual response to any effort to reduce alcohol problems through reductions in consumption is to brand it as a prohibitionist crusade. This kind of criticism is best handled by ensuring that the main thrust of the community activity remains on the track outlined here. Resistance sometimes comes from an unlikely source – namely, from individuals who have already tried before and failed to reduce alcohol problems. They may disapprove of the approaches outlined here. There can also be resistance from individuals who feel unhappy at any form of community enlightenment. Commercial forces outside a small community are unlikely to notice or react to changes within it. Obstructions by bigger commercial interests are therefore unlikely.

A different kind of reaction is overt hostility. Some individuals may misunderstand the community move as one directed against them. It should be made clear from the start that the initiative is not to force people who need alcohol for a good mood to stop their habit – even though many of them would indeed feel liberated if they overcame their reliance on alcohol. Liberation is not to be delivered by force.

The expression of resistance may take different forms including the undermining or discrediting of the individuals or agency stimulating the community drive and, rarely, overt hostility or aggression. Anticipating these reactions is helpful in forestalling them. Keeping things light, and at the level where the majority of the community is engaged, reduces the risk of less perceptive members of the community becoming hostile.

Maintaining interest

An approach that quietly helps people question their assumed truths about alcohol does not work through visible and attention-getting events. It then becomes rather difficult to sustain momentum. People conducting such an intervention have to learn to work for results that may take a few months to notice. Since the actions that we can take as individuals are simply things that we say and do in everyday life, we should easily be able to continue an indefinite process that leads to the changes described. This leads to significant shifts over time in the small group that we move in.

To create changes in a larger group requires more effort and this is where the difficulty of maintaining momentum arises. In such efforts, people conducting the intervention need some form of stimulus to maintain the initiative over some months. It helps to have periodic reviews of progress and plans. Even if two people get together to compare notes interest is sustained. A larger group should meet for formal reviews and even have responsibilities delegated to different individuals for different things – which helps improve the size of the impact considerably.

Step 14:

Consolidating and spreading success

When a community sees progress it should look at ways of spreading the process further. This can be within that community and outside it. Success can be spread without much effort. People can talk about the changes in their community with others, who may then feel like learning from this experience.

Success deserves celebration. Celebration is simply experiencing the joy of getting a positive outcome. It results in people becoming motivated to share success with others, which in turn serves as a stimulus for them. Part of a vanguard community's responsibility is to let others know what they have learnt through experience.

Conclusion

The foregoing was a menu of actions to get community work moving and then keeping it on track. Communities usually need at least a gentle push to get anything new started, just as we all do. A few individuals are enough to initiate a process. Even one individual need not vegetate 'for lack of support'. Generating just one small change usually leads to another. The expectation of grand or quick results is the main obstacle to doing the small but useful things that we can begin today.

Whatever progress we make in influencing any of the determinants listed, there is a possibility of going further. As we learn to create shifts in opinion and practice, and to overcome the resistances that always arise, we become more efficient. But there will always be new and more subtle approaches to develop and refine. We improve through experience combined with critical scrutiny of whatever we do.

Specific details and references are accessible in the book, 'Strategies to address alcohol problems' and relevant websites – e.g., of WHO or FORUT's www.add-resources.org

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