

# 4

## A PLAN FOR ACTION

This document is written for people who do not feel they are 'experts' on the subject of alcohol-related harm. It is written for people who are interested in initiating community action. This community-focused action is laid out in a series of 'worksheets' in section 5.

This section is about implementation. We include here, not only actions that can be undertaken by a community, but also discuss actions of any concerned individual committed to the work of addressing alcohol-related issues in his community.


Written text does not allow much room for interaction, but it should encourage the reader to respond with his own ideas. The most useful sections of this plan will probably be those that the reader/community worker disagrees with or finds difficult. More attention should be paid to those very sections – rather than focusing on what is familiar or easy to agree with. All attention should, of course, be critical. The reader can choose the point, in each part, from which he would like to commence. This should be based on his familiarity with the issues.

### 4.1 Why Should We Do Something about Alcohol-related Harm?

Let us look briefly at our own reasons for wanting to do something. Different people start from different points. We need to clarify our own reasons for wanting to do something to prevent alcohol-related harm. It may be, for instance, due to our concern about the extent of harm caused by alcohol to individuals, families or communities. Or we may belong to a group that is committed to improving our community and society. The group may have recognized that alcohol use is a major area of concern. We may even be motivated because it is relevant to the work or job we do, and because we are interested in doing our job well.

Whatever the reasons and motivations, it is worthwhile to pause and reflect on these. There are 'external' as well as 'internal' factors at play here. Among the internal or personal reasons is the urge to do something useful for society. This urge will become stronger when we recognize the real extent of alcohol-related harm. Seeing the beneficial results of our efforts is another stimulus to action.

We need to clarify our own reasons for wanting to do something to prevent alcohol-related harm.



Let us therefore remind ourselves of why it is worthwhile to do something to reduce alcohol-related harm. Sections 1 and 2 have already dealt with this from a theoretical point of view. But each of us sees some aspects that impel us to action. We should of course supplement our reasons with better understanding as we progress. In order to improve our own understanding, let us recall the harm and benefits caused by alcohol use:

- ◆ Deaths
- ◆ Medical and psychiatric diseases
- ◆ Disability
- ◆ Psychosocial problems
- ◆ Limiting people's lives
- ◆ Reduced community well-being
- ◆ Methanol poisoning
- ◆ Purported health benefits of alcohol use
- ◆ Impact of alcohol on marginalized communities, young people and women

An even more important reason for wanting to do something to reduce alcohol-related problems is that there are effective interventions available.

To this we can add other issues that we think are important particularly those applicable to our own community. The harm from alcohol use is proportionately more on those who are least able to afford it, namely the poorest sections of society. It is their health that is most affected. It is important to note here that the secondary impact of one person's alcohol consumption on others (for example, the impact on children's well-being and development) often goes unrecognized. Once again, this is most visible in the poorest families because they already lack money for basic needs.

An even more important reason for wanting to do something to reduce alcohol-related problems is that there are effective interventions available. Technically sound interventions can reduce problems significantly. This is true for community work as well. There is much evidence on effective actions that governments can undertake. Perhaps some of the community work should be to persuade the relevant national, state or regional authorities to adopt proven useful policies. There are global and national

Let us see where we have reached in our learning objectives:

- We have reviewed our own reasons for wanting to do something
- We have reminded ourselves of the range of harm from alcohol
- We think that there is enough reason for us to want to act
- But we need to work out what is more useful to do and what is less

measures that are known to reduce alcohol-related harm. When working in this field we should have some idea of these measures. A community should want to persuade policy-makers too to do the appropriate things.

## 4.2 Developing a Model for Understanding Facts about the Use of Alcohol

This is the first step in making our efforts systematic. How do we understand the spread, or continuation, of problematic alcohol consumption? This is the basis of our action. We need a model to understand how alcohol-related problems are generated and how they can be reduced. Previously we discussed a few basic principles for understanding the issues involved and itemized the elements of a comprehensive response.

## 4.3 Principles for Community-Based Work

There are some rather obvious principles to follow, to increase the impact of community-based efforts. These include the following:

- ◆ Success is achieved if people implementing the activity 'own' it, rather than having to follow orders or instructions
- ◆ Activities should remain within the level of resources, time, energy and interest of the people concerned
- ◆ People should understand why they need to do something about the problem
- ◆ People should recognize what kinds of changes can reasonably be expected in a given time frame
- ◆ People involved in implementation should be involved in evaluation as well

Let us see where we have reached in our learning objectives:


- We have looked at the elements that contribute to the success of community-based action

## 4.4 Improving Our Abilities

Often, communities that are committed to the reduction of alcohol-related problems get stuck in routine measures like giving lectures to schools or organizing marches and protests. Improving our ability to look critically at existing activities and thinking of new ways to tackle the same problem requires discipline. This discipline is what communities need to focus on.

A systematic approach will help us understand the reasons for harmful use of alcohol in our community.






This is not easy. Our usual tendency is to go on with whatever we are used to doing. To learn new skills requires some effort. It is easier to dismiss anything that requires effort. We must now overcome that tendency and see whether there are new things that we can usefully learn. Let us check if any of the steps outlined in these documents require that we learn new skills. If so, let us make the effort to develop those new abilities.

If we wish to succeed, we have to do all the things necessary for success. To go on doing only what we are able to do now, restricts the impact of our work.

### Capacities to develop



A further step is needed before the issues for implementation can be translated into real action. This is the development of the skills necessary for implementation. We are already able to understand and implement some of the things that were discussed in the previous section. But there are, or could be, some things that we do not yet have the ability to implement. Understanding alone is not enough for implementation. Some things require special skills too, before we can translate understanding into effective action.

Some of the skills (and attitudes) are those required for any community action. These are not specific to the work related to reducing alcohol-related harm. There are other skills or abilities that are specifically required for the activities listed in the preceding section — on the range of strategies that have to be implemented in communities.

Work in each community is likely to be conducted by someone other than the person reading this manual. So the reader needs to see what abilities the people working with communities are already likely to have. Then the required capacities that they do not possess can be worked out. These are not complex and difficult things to learn. But the idea that we must improve the abilities in which we are weak, is important.

A good example is the capacity or capability to assess the impact of our work. We may already be good at doing some things, but we may be weak in examining whether the actual results that we get are adequate for the effort we put in. Or we may benefit from looking at ways to improve the results that we already have. If we do not quite know how to examine, in an appropriate way, the short-term or long-term results of our actions, we cannot test ways to improve our results. The capabilities required for examining the results of our actions sensitively is something we may need to learn.

The idea that we must improve the abilities in which we are weak, is important.

## Capabilities to foster

Let us just list some of the important capacities we already possess. We can subsequently go through the list and see which capacities we may be lacking. Somebody who wishes to work in partnership with communities should try to develop the abilities and attributes listed here:

- ◆ to accept, respect and cooperate with people, irrespective of their level of alcohol consumption
- ◆ to prioritize targets and activities according to a model of understanding and resources available
- ◆ to design indicators and monitor progress in each area listed above
- ◆ to communicate the reasons that call for a response from all
- ◆ to engage individuals and groups
- ◆ to maintain optimal pace of activities to sustain interest and progress
- ◆ to improve understanding of technicalities relevant to the factors listed in 'prevention strategies'
- ◆ to recognize and accept the need for a wider system or 'network' to monitor progress

Those wanting to work in communities should pause to consider which of these qualities they lack or need to strengthen and then they should make a concerted effort to develop those.

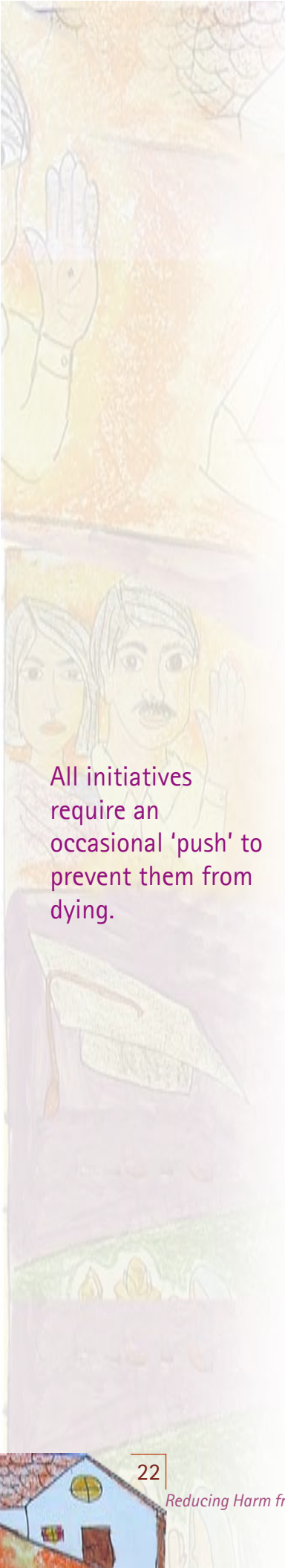
There are abilities that relate to the specific issue of alcohol use too. In the previous sections, several separate headings were listed. Each of the activities described require certain basic abilities. We do not need great sophistication for this work but a certain level of basic skills needs to be acquired. We can quickly go through the steps listed earlier and see whether we are confident about the matters raised. If not, we must first discuss with others how they understand a particular issue.

People discover that they need to learn some things only after they embark on action. This is perfectly understandable. If a difficulty or shortcoming is recognized, remedial measures can be taken. Others can be consulted. More reading can be done. Some actions can be practised. As long as we recognize the things that we need to keep learning, our efforts improve. Learning the skills necessary for good community work is not a waste of time.

## Appropriate materials

If all of the items listed in section 1 and 2 are put to a community group, they may find it too complicated. But we still have to address the issues in that section. So we must simplify the content.





One way to simplify matters is to provide a list of actions that can be taken up. The 'worksheets' are an attempt to put across the theory in a practical form. They can be modified and used as appropriate for each community.

### Collaboration with partners

All initiatives require an occasional 'push' to prevent them from dying. Our community efforts are more likely to succeed if we have support from the outside. This could take several forms.

If there are similar actions beginning in different communities, they will be strengthened by contact with each other. People from different communities must meet each other so that they can compare notes and learn from each other.

Technical inputs can enrich the quality of community work. An external resource can help the community to look at their activities critically. Such resources are difficult to find. It may be possible to get support from an individual or agency outside the community, at least occasionally. We should look for this kind of support even if none may be initially obvious.

One useful form of external technical support is in evaluation. Communities are good at taking action when properly stimulated. But they find it quite difficult to evaluate the impact of their actions. A competent and friendly person who provides technical help in evaluation is a great blessing.

Even if there is no 'technical' support available from outside the community, the interest and blessings of some good, committed individuals is very helpful. They can provide stimulus for new activities especially if people know that there are others outside who are interested in the welfare of the community. Such people do not necessarily have to be experts or specialists on harm from alcohol use, but can give valuable inputs by reading manuals like this one and checking on the community's progress.

### 4.5 Securing Short-term and Long-term Results

The 'worksheets' are for use by people who will work directly with communities. They have several suggestions on what people should look for, to judge the impact of their work.

People doing things with good intentions often expect ready support from others. Some expect big results from a small action. Giving lectures, having a programme 'to teach people the harm from alcohol use' are

All initiatives require an occasional 'push' to prevent them from dying.

examples of things frequently done. The expectation is that this activity will prevent those targeted from developing alcohol-related problems later. Audiences in these activities are generally school children. The expectation is to reduce their alcohol-related problems when they grow up. This expectation is unrealistic.

Many good activities lead to beneficial results. But these are not dramatic. Those conducting the activity are rarely sensitive to immediate results. In the 'worksheets' there are ideas on what the people of a community should look for in the short-term. These are realistic indicators of impact and are relevant to the size of the input.

Long-term results should not be forgotten. But it may be unrealistic to expect people working voluntarily with a community to do sophisticated evaluations. Section 4 provides them with guidelines on how to look for longer-term impact. But these should be kept at a realistic level.

The assessment of impact is vital so as to keep the community responses on the right track, and not to satisfy an external critic. We must put extra efforts into assessing results.

#### 4.6 Selecting the Right Partners

Work in a community can be initiated through those who are already part of it or by outsiders who are acceptable to the community. Our efforts must reach communities through the right partners.

Partners should be selected carefully. The real interest or motivation of those selected is most important. People who want to make a big show of things are rarely good at sustaining action. They are more interested in the publicity at an initial 'launch'. Those who are highly dogmatic and critical of others are also a bad choice. They may volunteer very earnestly. But they will only serve to distance the great majority from the activity.


The best way to judge with whom to work, is to look at their track record. Those who can speak about the results they have previously achieved, even if those are small ones, are good. People who like people are good. Those who have no respect for others are to be avoided. People who are committed but are still able to look critically at themselves are best.

#### 4.7 Helping Others to Develop

Good community work helps the community grow. In implementing our alcohol-related activities too, improving the community's understanding should be the priority. This means that we should keep examining whether the community's understanding is improving. We should

We need the right partners for effective implementation of our work.





Good community work helps the community grow.

monitor the following: whether the community's understanding of how they are being harmed or manipulated has improved; whether they feel stronger, capable of responding; and, whether they recognize what action is most useful and what progress is appropriate to expect.

Our implementation must not be rushed. At each step that is suggested, see where the community has reached, then work to improve the situation rather than jumping ahead.

There is no deadline to finish a community initiative. The community is where we live. Improving it can go on forever. Success is in getting a sustained process in motion. Our partners must learn to wait for the community to move rather than force it along.

Success is better assured by helping people to see, think and then act, rather than by pushing them to do what we recommend.

#### 4.8 If You Have to Do Things Alone..

In some instances there may be only one person available to initiate an activity in a community. If you are such a person, you will have to learn how much to try to achieve and how to go about it.

##### Scope of work

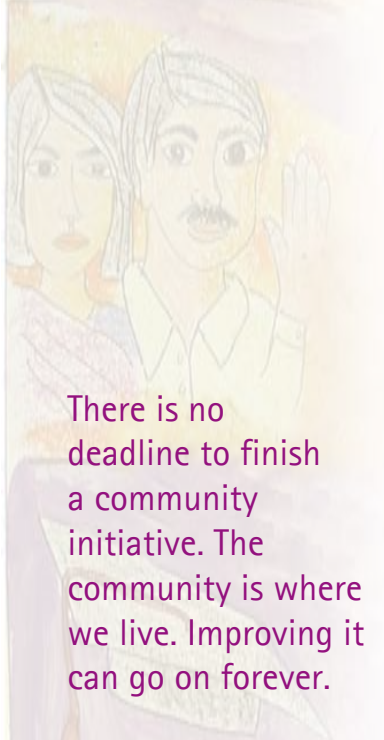
The best results are achieved by taking on as broad a goal as feasible. We cannot merely say, 'I will at least help so and so to stop drinking'; this is too narrow a goal. It prevents us from understanding the larger issues and we begin to look at the entire alcohol use issue from the point of view of one dependent drinker. His reality becomes ours.

To help even the one dependent drinker effectively, our vision and understanding should provide him with new insights. So the most important thing for you to do, if you work alone, is to broaden your understanding of all the issues.

##### Understanding issues

We need to keep looking at the world and to examine critically what we are taught about alcohol. Who teaches us about the effect of alcohol? Does the schoolboy who drinks alcohol offered at a party enjoy it? If so, what is it that makes alcohol intoxication enjoyable? Does the schoolboy, on the other hand, pretend that he enjoys alcohol because he has no other option? And does the pretence soon become reality?

We can look at more distant issues too. How is it that nearly all portrayals of alcohol use in the mass media reinforce the same idea? Alcohol use is



There is no deadline to finish a community initiative. The community is where we live. Improving it can go on forever.

portrayed as highly pleasurable, a sign of 'toughness', and an acceptable reason for becoming violent. Are these based on facts?

If we are alcohol drinkers ourselves, we can start by looking at our own experience and behaviour, which we do very rarely. We assume, for instance, that we enjoy the experience of alcohol use and that is why we drink it. So we can perhaps start by looking at our own reasons for consuming alcohol and we may be surprised by what we find. We can also look at our behaviour in drinking situations. We may be contributing to creating a particular tendency there. This may be to encourage people to drink more, even when they do not wish to. Do we too contribute to this, perhaps without realizing that we do? These are just examples. There is much to learn and it is usually a joy to learn.

### Stimulating others

What you can do at an individual level will be different from what a group or an organization undertakes. A single individual cannot conduct large-scale crusades, but this may be an advantage. We should start small and be happy with small successes. But our vision should be to spread our successful strategies everywhere.

Things we personally discover about alcohol use may, for example, be different from what is widely believed. Instead of assuming that our experience must somehow be wrong, we can try to see whether others can learn from ours. If we realize that we consume alcohol even though we have never really liked its effects or taste, we can start asking others whether any of them has had the same experience. A few of us can start questioning the assumptions that do not tally with our own experience of alcohol.


Similarly, we can start questioning our practice (if it is indeed our practice) of always encouraging everybody to drink more. We can stimulate others too, to get them to question some beliefs and practices that are worth challenging. And these can be done while we continue to be a part of an alcohol-using group.

A practice that we should definitely try to change is that of people using alcohol consumption as a reason to be abusive or violent. The process of questioning can focus on this alone. Should we allow someone who has consumed alcohol to abuse another? We can give examples of how someone who gets violent 'because of' intoxication is still able to choose whom to victimize. Also, we can show how the level of violence changes from situation to situation. We can stimulate others to reject this practice. If an alcohol-using group starts to discuss how each member behaves

Alcohol use is portrayed as highly pleasurable, a sign of 'toughness', and an acceptable reason for becoming violent. These are myths which need to be dispelled.

We should start small and be happy with small successes. But our vision should be to spread our successful strategies everywhere.






when intoxicated, they may begin to understand that a few use alcohol *only* as an excuse to be abusive. What would happen if we agreed that we shall no longer accept or excuse anyone in our group using alcohol as a reason for becoming violent? We can start the dialogue and see what happens.

Changing the behaviour within an alcohol-using group is an example of what one individual could do. It is easier for the individual who is already a member of a 'drinking' group. But others too can look at ways of reaching such groups.

A practice that we should definitely try to change is that of people using alcohol consumption as a reason to be abusive or violent.

### Looking at relevant indicators



Even if you are alone in doing things, you should still look at the results of your efforts. Have you succeeded in initiating a small process? For example, are some people in drinking situations now questioning the behaviour of a few uncivilized individuals? Do a few others give support when you question some of the common assumptions? Do they too enjoy the idea of taking away the false glamour built up around alcohol?

More tangible and useful results are a reduction in the amount of excessive drinking in your group. Another is the reduction of aggressive and violent behaviour after the use of alcohol in your community. The most important indicators are those that measure the change that you have achieved right now. The end results that your initiative is aimed at are also important, but the immediate outcome is more sensitive.

### Spreading, and celebrating success

When you see benefits you should look at ways of spreading the process further. This can be within your community as well as outside it. You can just talk about the changes in your community with others. They may feel like learning from your experience.

We are able to spread the successes we achieve when we see their value. So we must celebrate the successes achieved even if some are too small to be celebrated with others. But recognition is important.

The intent of this section was to show that even a single individual can make a difference. He should not sit back 'for lack of support'. Initiating one change usually leads to another. Even if results are not huge and quick, every small initiative makes an impact.

**We must celebrate the successes achieved even if they are small. Recognition is important.**

## 4.9 Working with, or through, a Group...

In some instances we already have a group that is working. The group may be just an informal collection of people or a formal organization. Working within such a group creates opportunities as well as obstacles, but clearly, the results we can aim for are higher if we have access to the resources of a group of people, rather than if we work alone.

### Choosing the right group to work with

If we had a choice among several groups through which to implement a community initiative, which should we choose? Perhaps the most important criterion is the history of each group. How much has it achieved in the past? Are they able to explain the results they achieved or looked for? We should go with those groups who understand how to look for results.

A second criterion is their interest in reducing alcohol-related harm. A group, already keen to reduce such harm, is easier to motivate. Among such groups those motivated by an objective understanding of the scale of harm caused by alcohol are best. Others who are keen because they have a passion 'to rid the world of alcohol' may be less flexible in selecting the best options for minimizing harm.

Those who want to be self-reliant are generally better than those who depend on outside funds to work within their own community. People who have proved their ability to work long-term are a safer bet.

### Getting alcohol on the agenda of the group

Some groups already have alcohol-related problems on their agenda. Others you will have to work on, to help them see the links between alcohol consumption and their current concerns. Most development-oriented agencies will already be aware that alcohol has a major harmful impact. So they will not need much persuasion to take it on board.


The reason why such agencies do not attempt to combat alcohol-related problems is that they think it is a waste of time. The common belief is that the occurrence of these problems can be reduced only through strict regulation of supply, something outside the control of most communities. Others believe that measures to reduce the harm are not known. We have to correct this perception. Good organizations will be interested when they realize that they, too, have the power to improve the situation.

We have to explain that people who use alcohol themselves can also work effectively to reduce its harm. In many localities, alcohol-related work

Even a single individual can make a difference. Initiating one change usually leads to another.

One reason why many agencies do not attempt to combat alcohol-related problems is that they think it is a waste of time.





Prevention of alcohol-related harm is not a moral crusade aimed only at promoting abstinence or prohibition.

is seen as an attempt to stop people consuming alcohol by adopting a 'moral' stand. There are people in 'development' agencies who themselves drink, and therefore hesitate to talk about its harmful effects. They must be made to understand that prevention of alcohol-related harm is not really a moral crusade aimed only at promoting abstinence or prohibition.

### Recognizing different influences within the group

Individuals in a group or organization have different levels of concern about a problem and different ideas on the best course of action. So obviously the results a group can achieve are influenced by the level of agreement within the group.

Some individuals may only criticize the authorities (or the world) about the spread of alcohol-related problems without really being concerned about the best ways of combatting it. We must also study carefully the power that influential individuals within a group wield and whether this can be used in a positive way.

### Improving the group's understanding

Even a group that has worked for long in this field can benefit from looking critically at all the things they do. They can be helped to pick the useful things and discard the rest. On what have they based their actions so far? Do they believe, for example, that teaching young people about the risks of alcohol use is enough to prevent them from getting into trouble with alcohol later? Or do they feel that the community should block access to alcohol for those who consume it? Did they base their efforts only on rehabilitating dependent users? The more comprehensive the mix of things they have done, the better. But there may still be more things to add.

It is also important to understand what makes alcohol consumption so attractive. Do we counter the spread of the use of alcohol by educating people about its harmful impact or should we also try to counter the attraction? Who are the people who build up its powerful, symbolic, positive image? And how do they do this? What would be the best ways to change this perception? It is all these questions that need to be addressed by any group working in the area of alcohol abuse.

### Developing a programme for action

Most 'plans' are based on a set of actions to be completed within a stipulated time frame. This is necessary if a project is to achieve its objectives on schedule. However, this may not be the best way to get optimal results in an activity within your own community.

In trying to improve community life, we do not have to finish an activity by a scheduled date. Our results should not be restricted by a formal time frame or plan. And we certainly do not want to stop work and end a programme on a given date.

So the programme of action that we develop for our own community should be designed for continued progress. We have to map the direction in which we want to go. And we must check periodically how far we have progressed. The speed at which one community moves will be very different from another. And it is difficult to say at the start how much progress we will be able to make in a fixed time.

There will be several avenues on which we want to make progress. The progress we can make in one direction may be much greater than in another. The worksheets in section 5 list out the major avenues on which to seek progress. They also give an idea of how to achieve progress and how to assess progress.

A list of steps that each community must undertake is useful. Simply 'doing something' about alcohol consumption is not enough to prevent alcohol-related problems. Doing the wrong things can worsen problems.

### **Tailoring expectations according to the time and effort that is put in**

It is helpful to have broad and appealing goals or vision. This helps us to do things. It also encourages people to join the initiative. At the same time we have to recognize the distance we can travel in a given time. Work to reduce alcohol-related harm is mostly undertaken voluntarily. So the time and energy that can be put in is small. The results we expect to achieve must match the effort put in.

### **Looking at relevant indicators**

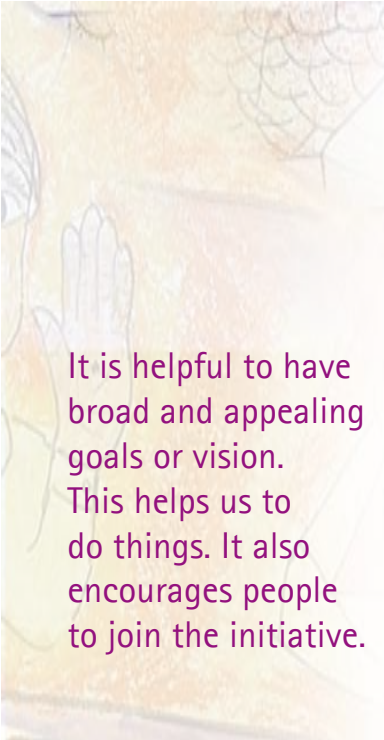
Our efforts, even if they are voluntary, should not be a waste of time. So we must learn to measure progress correctly, in order to recognize what we are doing well and where improvement is required.

Let us say we are keen to reduce the number of violent incidents caused after alcohol use. We may already know that about thirty incidents of women being physically abused by their husbands are seen at the local hospital every year. The number of women taken to the hospital every year can be used as an indicator of impact for our activity. If the number drops to twenty we can, of course, use that as a measure of our work. A drop in our area with no corresponding change in adjacent areas is stronger proof that our efforts have had an impact.

Even a group that has worked for long in this field can benefit from looking critically at all the things they do.

The programme of action that we develop for a community should be designed for continued progress.





It is helpful to have broad and appealing goals or vision. This helps us to do things. It also encourages people to join the initiative.

Such trends, if sustained over several years, would be a good indicator of long term impact.

Measuring shorter-term impact is more useful as an immediate guide. And the best indicator of short-term impact is different from that of the longer-term. For example, it is *not* a good enough indicator of a month's progress to see whether the number of abused women goes down by one or two. The short-term progress we look for is not just a small part of the result that we want in the long-term.


The correct short-term indicator must measure changes which *contribute* to the long-term change. So we need to see whether alcohol-users are now accepting that they should not indulge in abusive behaviour after drinking. Do they now say that their colleagues who become abusive after alcohol consumption should not be permitted to do so? Or is there a stronger feeling in the community that it will no longer excuse people who misbehave, simply because they have consumed alcohol? Are people in the community more aware of the fact that the person who becomes abusive after alcohol consumption still appears to select certain people as victims and not others? These are examples of changes that happen along the way to reducing the occurrence of abuse, and such changes can be checked.

The attached 'worksheets' cover a range of avenues of progress. Under each, there will be details of indicators to look for immediately, and at various later stages.

### Spreading and celebrating success

Success deserves celebration. We should, in our group, develop the habit of sharing even small incidents that indicate progress. Someone who previously walked down the road loudly shouting at others may now be quieter as he walks home drunk. This is a positive development. And we may see it as a sign that our efforts are making progress. We must then recognize this success. Others in our group too should have the opportunity to see that things are moving in the right direction.

Celebration is simply experiencing the joy of getting a positive outcome. It should result in our becoming motivated to share small successes with others. The success of a particular approach in one community is a stimulus for others to repeat the experiment. Part of our responsibility is to let others know what we have learnt through our experience.



Celebration is simply experiencing the joy of getting a positive outcome.

## Conclusion

A few ideas on how to proceed with community action have been dealt with here. These were presented as a supplement to the worksheets that follow. Since the worksheets do not explain the rationale for any idea that is suggested, doubts that arise have to be clarified by referring back to this and the earlier sections.



